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DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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India, Israel to soon seal free trade deal

17 deals on AI, trade, defence, tech signed

JERUSALEM, 26 FEB

India and Israel on Thursday elevated their "time-tested" relationship to a Special Strategic Partnership and agreed to fast-track a long-pending free trade agreement. This is as New Delhi navigates US tariffs and a trade impasse with Washington, a key Israeli ally.

Following talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu, the two sides signed 17 agreements covering artificial intelligence, trade, investment, manufacturing, education, culture, maritime heritage and agriculture. They also agreed to deepen defence cooperation through joint development, production and technology transfer, while expanding collaboration into civil nuclear energy and space.

On the US-Iran standoff, Modi said India was ready to mediate if required.

PM Narendra Modi visited Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust Remembrance Center with Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu. India faces flak for its bonhomie with Israel, which has been accused of genocide in Gaza. Israel's defence assault in Gaza has killed over 72,000 Palestinians. Over 157 children were starved to death due to a blockade of aid —*PTI*

'PM HAILS TRUMP'S GAZA PEACE PLAN'

Backing US President Donald Trump's Gaza Peace Plan, Modi said a road to peace had been created through the initiative.

"India's stance is clear: humanity must never become a victim of conflict. A path to peace has been created through the Gaza Peace Plan," he said.

Under the peace plan, Trump has formed a Board of Peace, which experts describe as an alternative to the United Nations. India has not joined the board so far.

This comes as India faces criticism over its close ties with Israel, which faces allegations of genocide in Gaza.

In a pointed reference to Hamas, he said: "India and Israel are absolutely clear that terrorism has no place in the world. Terrorism, in any form, in any manifestation, cannot be tolerated."

Modi, who arrived in Israel on Wednesday on a two-day visit, made the remarks during a media briefing.

ISRAEL TO GET UPI

An agreement was also reached to enable the use of India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) in Israel. In agriculture, Modi announced that the number of India-Israel Centres of Excellence would be increased to 100. Building on their success, both sides plan to develop "Villages of Excellence" to enhance farm productivity. These high-tech agricultural hubs designed to transfer advanced Israeli technologies to Indian farmers. —*PTI*

CARNEY TO START INDIA TOUR TODAY

India on Thursday said talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Canadian counterpart Mark Carney next week will help advance a forward-looking partnership. Carney will begin a four-day visit to India on Friday his first since taking office aimed at restoring momentum to ties strained by a 2023 diplomatic row over the killing of a Khalistani separatist. He will first visit Mumbai for business engagements with Indian and Canadian industry leaders, before travelling to New Delhi on Sunday. Wide-ranging talks between the two leaders are scheduled for Monday. —*PTI*

>>>More on Page 3

Azim Premji students voice concern over FIR

BENGALURU, 26 FEB

Days after an ABVP protest over an event concerning Jammu and Kashmir in the Azim Premji University here, the varsity's student council on Thursday expressed concern over an FIR registered against the members of a reading circle. It urged the administration to reconsider pursuing criminal action against the students connected to the SPARK reading circle. ABVP demonstrated recently against the university, alleging that an event at the institution was promoting separatism and secession of Jammu and Kashmir. —*PTI*

>>>More on Page 2

Defence expert Maroof Raza no more

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

Major Maroof Raza, a retired Indian Army officer and prominent defence analyst, died on Thursday. Born in 1959, he gained extensive experience in counter-insurgency operations, which shaped his later work as a strategic affairs commentator on India-Pakistan relations and national security. A familiar face on Indian television, he anchored shows like 'Line of Duty', 'Latitude' and 'India Risk Report', and was widely respected for his sharp analysis, mentorship, and writings on defence and geopolitics. —***Agencies***

Panel probing Justice Varma reconstituted

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

LS Speaker Om Birla reconstituted a three-member committee to examine the proposed removal of Yashwant Varma after burnt bundles of cash were allegedly recovered from his residence in March last year. The panel, first formed on 12 August, following a multi-party notice in the Lok Sabha, has been granted a three-month extension from 26 February. The reconstituted committee comprises Justice Aravind Kumar of the Supreme Court, Justice Shree Chandrashekhar, Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court. —*PTI*

Modi is now most followed world leader on Insta

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

Narendra Modi has surpassed 100 million followers on Instagram, becoming the first world leader to reach the milestone.He now leads all major world leaders on Instagram, with more than double the followers of Donald Trump, who has 43.2 million. In India, Modi's dominance is equally clear. Yogi Adityanath is second with around 16.1 million followers, followed by Rahul Gandhi with about 12.6 million. Officials said the figures underline Modi's extensive outreach and strong appeal among audiences. —*PTI*

SC bans NCERT book over 'corrupt judiciary' chapter

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

The Supreme Court on Thursday imposed a "complete blanket ban" on any further pub-lication, reprinting, or digital dissemination of NCERT's Class 8 social science book for "offending" content on judicial corruption. The bench observed a "deep-rooted con-spiracy" and "calculated move" to undermine and demean the dignity of the judiciary, directing that all physical and digital copies be immediately seized and removed from public access.

Show-cause notices were issued to the NCERT director and the secretary of the De-partment of School Education, asking why suitable action, including contempt, should not be initiated against those responsible

The court warned that attempts to circumvent the order through electronic media or alternative titles would be treated as a direct interference and willful defiance. "They have fired a gunshot. The judiciary is bleeding," the court said. The court also thanked the media for bringing to the fore the NCERT book issue, as otherwise the damage would have been "completely irreversible".

It said if allowed to go unchecked, it would erode the sanctity of judicial office and the estimation of public at large and more importantly, within the impressionable minds of youth.

Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan expressed anguish over the chapter and promised to ensure accountability, taking action against those involved in drafting the controversial portion.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had also voiced displeasure at the inclusion of a judicial corruption case in material meant for middle school students. —*PTI*

SC issues notice to govt, EC on misuse of money in polls

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

The Supreme Court on Thursday sought responses from the Centre and the Election Commission on a plea seeking directions to impose ceiling on the expenditure by political parties for election purposes.

The plea by NGOs Common Cause and Centre For Public Interest Litigation stated that the absence of any expenditure limit on political parties, despite strict limits on individual candidates, creates an "unlevel playing field" in electoral contests. The plea said free and fair elections form the bedrock of any democracy and one of the most important aspects is an electoral system free of corruption. The SC earlier observed that elections are being contested on the strength of money power received from illegal sources. —*PTI*

Ex-Gauhati HC judge quits Manipur panel

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

The Centre has appointed former Supreme Court judge Balbir Singh Chauhan as chairperson of the inquiry commission probing the 2023 Manipur violence, following the resignation of Gauhati Justice Ajai Lamba, effective 28 February.

Justice Chauhan will assume charge on 1 March, the Home Ministry said. The commission, set up on 4 June 2023, was originally headed by Justice Lamba. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court directed the CBI and Manipur SITs to share charge sheets with victims' families. Former Maharashtra police chief Dattatray Padsalgikar reported 20 cases filed, with six more under probe. Over 200 have died and thousands displaced since the 3 May ethnic violence. —*PTI*

- The bench asked the CBI to ensure that the investigation in remaining violence cases are over within stipulated time and chargesheets are filed.

WEF head steps down over Epstein links

GENEVA, 26 FEB

World Economic Forum head Børge Brende stepped down on Thursday after facing pressure over his contacts with the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. Brende, who became president of the WEF in 2017, joins the ranks of prominent figures under fire after the US Department of Justice released Epstein files.

WEF announced earlier this month that it was opening an internal review into Brende's relationship with Epstein after files indicated the two had dined several times.

Brende, a former Norwegian foreign minister from 2013-2017, said in a statement that he had decided "after careful consideration" to step down as president and chief executive of the forum, known for its annual January summit in the Swiss Alpine resort of Davos.

US Justice Department (DOJ) files revealed that Brende had dined with Epstein at least thrice, one meeting was as recent as 2019 at Epstein's New York home, just weeks before he was arrested for child sex trafficking.

One of Epstein's emails shows Brende suggesting that the WEF could replace the United Nations.

Brende has earlier said that he only met Epstein in business settings and was unaware of his criminal background.

WEF co-chairs André Hoffmann and Larry Fink said Alois Zwinggi will serve as the forum's interim president and CEO.

He served as Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs, where he handled major diplomatic issues including Russia's annexation of Crimea and Norway-China relations.

The forum has not indicated when the review into Brende's Epstein links will continue following his resignation. —*Salar News*

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M'rashtra CID to probe sabotage angle in Ajit's plane crash

PUNE, 26 FEB

Maharashtra CID announced it will probe whether the Baramati plane crash that killed Ajit Pawar was due to criminal conspiracy, sabotage, or negligence.

A PIL was filed in the Bombay High Court seeking a court-monitored probe into the crash. Social activist Ketan Tirodkar petitioned for a judicial inquiry headed by a retired High Court judge, citing concerns over irregularities, the flight's registration, and safety violations. Tirodkar also questioned a last-minute change from road travel and the replacement of pilots]. Meanwhile, Rohit Pawar, nephew of Ajit Pawar, and his cousin Yugendra Pawar approached Baramati police demanding an FIR against VSR Ventures, operator of the ill-fated aircraft.

On the other hand, Sunetra Pawar was unanimously elected as the new national president of the NCP at a party meeting, succeeding her late husband. —*Salar News*

Yadgir godman booked under POCSO after video goes viral

YADGIR, 26 FEB

A 26-year-old self-styled godman, Mallikarjuna Muthya, has been booked under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act after a video allegedly showing him behaving inappropriately with a seven-year-old girl went viral on social media.

The FIR alleges that during a birthday celebration at Mahal Roja Mutt in Shahapur taluk, Mutya took the child onto his lap, dragged her across a table, and hugged and kissed her in front of her parents. The footage, recorded on 19 February, reportedly shows the child visibly uncomfortable. Public outrage followed the video's Instagram upload.

Following a complaint by the Karnataka State Commission for Protection of Child Rights, Chairman Shashidhar Kosembe wrote to the Superintendent of Police, leading to registration of the POCSO case at Gogi Police Station. Shahapur CPI Sharangouda Nyamannavar has been appointed to investigate. Police and officials from the Women and Child Welfare Department and Child Protection Unit conducted a spot inspection of the mutt.

Mallikarjuna Muthya —*SALAR*

Mutya defended himself, claiming the gestures were affectionate and not harmful. Amid the controversy, supporters have launched an online campaign with posters stating, "We Stand With Mallikarjun Mutya," and gathered at the mutt, alleging attempts to defame him.

Over the past four years, Mutya, a resident of Mahal Roja village, has gained prominence through social media as a godman, with devotees treating his words as gospel. Authorities are expected to issue a notice for him to appear for questioning. —*Salar News*

A RELIEF FOR FLYERS

Now, cancel plane tickets within 48 hrs without paying extra charges

The aviation watchdog, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation, has revised ticket refund norms to make them more passenger-friendly. Earlier, airlines charged flat cancellation fees ranging from Rs 2,500 to Rs 4,999 for domestic flights and at least Rs 10,000 for international. The move follows a rise in complaints over high charges, flight cancellations and delays in refunds, particularly during the December 2025 IndiGo crisis. Here are the new rules:

HOWEVER, THERE WILL BE NO REFUNDS ON TICKET BOOKED FOR

Domestic flights departing in **<7 DAYS**

International flights departing in **<15 DAYS**

Passengers can cancel or amend tickets within **48 HOURS** of booking without extra charges.

The other revamps include:

Cancellation charges for tickets cannot exceed the sum of the basic fare & fuel surcharge.

Airlines must refund tickets within 14 working days directly to flyers even if booked through agents.

- Airlines cannot charge for correcting a passenger's name within 24 hours of booking.
- Refund must if passenger or family members hospitalised during travel and ticket is cancelled.
- Airlines are barred from levying any additional "processing fee" for issuing refunds.

—FREEPIK

9-year-old girl dies due to suspected cardiac arrest in R'than

JAIPUR, 26 FEB

A nine-year-old girl died of a suspected cardiac arrest at a private school in Rajasthan's Nagaur district, police said on Thursday. The incident occurred Monday morning in Gotan town. Police reported that Divya Bapedia, a Class 5 student from Talnapur, was playing with other children on the school ground before morning prayers when she suddenly collapsed. School staff took her to the local community health centre (CHC), where doctors declared her dead. Doctors suspect cardiac arrest as the cause of death. CCTV footage from the playground, which surfaced on social media, shows Divya playing moments before she collapsed. Dr Sukhram, in charge of Gotan CHC, said the girl had no prior medical history, and there were no external injuries. The family refused a post-mortem, and the body was handed over to them. —*PTI*

Rajasthan man looking for missing SUV in City, beaten

BENGALURU, 26 FEB

A 32-year-old man from Rajasthan, Chandra Prakash of Jodhpur, was assaulted and robbed in the City while attempting to retrieve his missing SUV. Prakash had lent his vehicle to a friend, Mahendra Gujjar, over a year ago, but it was not returned. He tracked the SUV using a mobile app and found it in Bengaluru, reaching the City with a spare key on 23 February. After unlocking it, three men on a two-wheeler intercepted him near Bommanahalli Circle. The suspects assaulted him with an iron rod and helmet, stealing two mobile phones and fleeing with the SUV. A Rajasthani businessman was arrested and cops hunt for four more. —*PTI*

Cops bust M'rashtra dacoits gang in Sirsi

SIRSI, 26 FEB

Uttara Kannada district police busted a dacoit gang who allegedly planned a robbery on Sirsi highway in the district as well to rob the devotees in the annual ongoing popular Sri Maarikamba Devi Jatra. The Yellapur police led by PSI Yellapur Gudi on reliable information rushed to the Sirsi highway on Wednesday and apprehended all eight suspects. Police have seized materials worth approximately Rs 4 lakh from the accused, including a Maruti Ertiga car, four monkey caps to cover the faces, chilli powder, and four iron rods. —*Salar News*

More free auto training for women & transgender

BENGALURU, 26 FEB

Minister Ramalinga Reddy on Thursday termed the initiative offering free auto-driving training to women and transgender persons as commendable and called for its expansion across the State. Speaking at a programme in BTM Layout organised by the Bangalore Political Action Committee (B PAC) and CGI, a global IT and business consulting firm, he lauded the efforts. He said discussions would be held after the State Budget to introduce schemes for auto drivers. —*PTI*

Addl Chief Secy pays surprise visits to Victoria Hospital

BENGALURU, 26 FEB

Additional Chief Secretary (Medical Education) Mohammed Mohsin conducted a surprise inspection of the Institute of Nephro-Urology at the Victoria Hospital campus on Thursday. He interacted with doctors, staff and patients, and reviewed the hospital's facilities and services. Mohsin directed officials to ensure that patients face no inconvenience and receive timely and appropriate treatment. "We are committed to ensuring healthcare for all," he said. Patients shared feedback and expressed satisfaction with the treatment and facilities provided. Mohsin also stated that similar inspections would be conducted in hospitals across various districts in the State to monitor services and reform implementation. —*Salar News*

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Students fume after Azim Premji varsity books them

Varsity says reading group did not notify it about J&K event

BENGALURU, 26 FEB

ABVP members vandalised the Azim Premji University's sign, writing 'Ban Spark' over a discussion about alleged mass rapes by the Indian Army in Jammu and Kashmir, in Bengaluru —*PTI*

The Student Council of Azim Premji University on Thursday slammed the varsity for registering an FIR against members of the SPARK Reading Circle after members of the ABVP stormed and vandalised the campus.

The university registrar had earlier filed a police complaint against the reading group, alleging that it had not authorised the discussion on the alleged mass rape of Kashmiri women in Kunan Poshpor by the Indian Army on 23 February, 1991.

This discussion had prompted Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) activists to storm the university and spray ink over the name plates, alleging the students were promoting separatism and were against insulting the Indian Army.

In its FIR, the registrar sought to identification of people operating the Instagram page named "Spark Reading Circle, APU" and requested that appropriate legal action be taken against them. It alleged that they had shared the post about the event, despite obtaining no written permission for the event.

However, the student council said it was particularly concerned about what it described as an "asymmetry in outcomes" following recent events on the campus.

"Those who entered this campus uninvited, caused physical harm to members of our community, and damaged university property have been granted bail and face bailable charges. Meanwhile, our students who organised a peaceful gathering, whatever the procedural lapses, are now subject to a non-bailable offence under Section 299," the statement said.

The council said the University's education actively encourages critical engagement with history, politics, and social justice.

"We are taught to ask hard questions, and have considered the University to be a safe space for open discussions. For the administration to respond to students doing exactly that with a criminal FIR undermines the very intellectual freedom this institution is founded on," it added. —*PTI*

The AQI in Bengaluru on Thursday was 131 —*PTI*

If AQI crosses 100, local bodies to get notices: Khandre

BENGALURU, 26 FEB

Environment Minister Eshwar Khandre on Thursday said that Bengaluru residents should keep checking the air quality index (AQI) to keep a tab on the worsening levels of pollution, telling them to take action if the index crosses 100.

The AQI in Bengaluru on Thursday was 131.

A meeting of 28 MLAs was held to discuss the issue of pollution. Officials, including principal chief conservator of forests Meenakshi Negi and chief wildlife warden Kumar Pushkar, were also present.

The City's air, water, and noise pollution levels are alarming, with dust on roads causing respiratory issues in children, Rajajinagar MLA Suresh Kumar said.

Khandre has instructed officials to issue notices to local bodies if the air quality index crosses 100.

"We will not hesitate to take strict action against officials concerned as well as others involved if no measures are taken to control pollution," he warned.

Khandre said a vigilante group should be constituted to control single-use plastic wastes.

He directed the Environment Department to inspect waste treatment plants and submit a report within a month.

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar will also hold a meeting to discuss strategies to increase the City's green cover and tackle pollution. —*Salar News*

Dad & son held for M'luru moral policing

MANGALURU, 26 FEB

The police have arrested two men for moral policing, assaulting, filming and making casteist remarks against a minor boy and a girl in Mangaluru.

The incident occurred in the Attavar Babugudde area on the outskirts of the city, when a minor boy and girl had been seated near the railway tracks. The accused, identified as Steven Montero and his son Avil, reportedly approached them and began making their videos in their mobile phones.

Police officials said that father-son duo verbally abused the children using obscene and casteist remarks and also assaulted the boy. They are also accused of recording the incident and attempting to circulate the video on social media to cause distress and harm the reputation of the children. Taking note of the video that surfaced online and based on the complaints by the minors, a case was registered against the accused at the Mangaluru South Police Station.

The accused have been booked under provisions of the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. Both the father and his son have been taken into custody. The police have warned that acts of moral policing and caste-based abuse constitute serious criminal offences. —*Salar News*

SHIRTS COME OFF, AGAIN

Members of the National Students Union of India (NSUI) showed solidary with Indian Youth Congress members who were arrested for their shirtless protest during the AI Summit in New Delhi, by following suit. NSUI members were detained at Freedom Park on Thursday *PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD*

Parameshwara distances himself from 'next CM' chants

BENGALURU, 26 FEB

Home Minister G Parameshwara distanced himself from supporters raising slogans in favour of him becoming the next Chief Minister, saying that he did not wish to fuel speculation or lobby for the post as any decision rests with the party High Command.

Speaking to reporters in Bengaluru on Wednesday, Parameshwara said he had no role in the slogans raised by his followers. "Our High Command will take a decision at the appropriate time."

"Our well-wishers here may be expressing their feelings. How can I tell them not to do that?" he said.

Meanwhile, KPCC Working President and MLA Tanveer Sait said in Mysuru that the power sharing tussle was causing internal instability and damaging the party's reputation in the State.

He urged the High Command to resolve the issue at the earliest. He said that he would be AICC General Secretary and Karnataka in charge Randeep Singh Surjewala at New Delhi soon and would press upon him to raise the issue with the High Command. —*Salar News with Agencies*

'Guarantees are financial burden but won't stop'

BENGALURU, 26 FEB

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar stated that the state's five "guarantees" are a financial "burden" on the exchequer but assured that beneficiaries would continue to receive benefits. He repeated comments made the previous day, adding that benefits drawn in the name of "dead people" must be stopped.

He told reporters that there is no need to revise the guarantees, which he said aim to strengthen families financially and mentally. His remarks have sparked debate, with the Congress supporting continued welfare, while BJP criticised delays in development.

The guarantees include 'Gruha Jyothi' (free 200 units electricity), 'Gruha Lakshmi' (Rs 2,000 to women heads of families), 'Anna Bhagya' (10 kg rice to BPL families), 'Yuva Nidhi' (Rs 3,000 to unemployed graduates, Rs 1,500 to diploma holders), and 'Shakti' (free travel for women within Karnataka).

Shivakumar highlighted that these schemes aim to keep money in citizens' hands and maintain confidence during distress, despite the financial strain. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and others affirmed that development and welfare would continue, with Siddaramaiah stating Rs 1.2 lakh crore had already been spent on guarantees. —*PTI*

FORGING NEW REALITIES

State to host seventh edition of GAFX 2026 from 27 Feb

BENGALURU, 26 FEB

GAFX 2026 will host 200+ speakers across 100+ sessions, masterclasses and workshops, over three days at Hotel Lalit Ashok —*X @PRIYANKKHARGE*

The Karnataka government in collaboration with the Association of Bangalore Animation Industry, will host the seventh edition of Bengaluru GAFX 2026, one of the country's largest AVGC-XR conferences and exhibitions, from 27 February.

The three-day summit will be inaugurated by CM Siddaramaiah and his Deputy DK Shivakumar, along with actor Sudeepa Sanjeev, among other dignitaries.

It will bring together creators, studios, technologists, investors, policymakers, global studios, education leaders and industry bodies from India and abroad, reinforcing Karnataka's position as a leading hub for the AVGC-XR (Animation, Visual Effects, Gaming, Comics and Extended Reality) creative technology ecosystem, officials said.

A major highlight of GAFX 2026 will be the first-ever exclusive behind-the-scenes showcase of 'Kantara: Chapter 1', offering audiences and industry professionals a rare look into the making of one of India's most anticipated projects, a statement said.

GAFX will also present a deep dive into the making of the Oscar-nominated animated short film 'Cardboard' by DNEG Animation, as well as a craft session on the Oscar-nominated feature 'The Lost Bus' by Industrial Light & Magic (ILM) for the first time, it said. These sessions will be joined by other high-profile behind-the-scenes and making-of presentations, including 'Deadpool and Wolverine: The Art of Blood and Guts' by Framestore and a behind-the-scenes session on Netflix's hit animated show 'Kurukshetra' by HiTech Animation Studios.

The theme for this year 'Evolution Reloaded' reflects Karnataka's belief that the next phase of growth in creative industries will be driven by the convergence of human imagination and deep technology, Minister Priyank Kharge said. —*PTI*

GOVT TO SET UP 'INNOVATION LABS' IN 60 SCHOOLS

BENGALURU, 26 FEB

The Karnataka government is taking steps to establish 'Innovation Labs' in around 60 residential schools across the state, Science and Technology Minister NS Boseraju said on Thursday.

He was inaugurating the 'National Science Day' celebrations, organised by the Department of Science and Technology at the Jawaharlal Nehru Planetarium here.

Elaborating on the government's push to draw rural students towards advanced technology, he stated that both 'Nehru Stream Labs' and 'Innovation Labs' are being rolled out state-wide.

He said that 'Nehru Stream Labs' is being set up in Karnataka Public Schools in the Kalyana Karnataka region in collaboration with the Kalyana Karnataka Region Development Board (KKRDB).

Under the SCSP (Scheduled Castes Sub-Plan)/TSP (Tribals Sub-Plan) grants for the 2025-26 academic year, Rs 6 crore has been allocated to build 'Innovation Labs' in 60 residential schools, he said.

Boseraju said the push was "to move beyond rote textbook learning and encourage activity-based education" to instill a scientific tempermant from a young age and will especially help minorities. —*PTI*

7-year-old boy's organs save four lives in City

BENGALURU, 26 FEB

The family of a seven-year-old boy, who was declared brain dead at KIMS Hospital in Bengaluru, donated his organs, giving a new lease of life to four patients, officials said on Thursday. The boy was brought to KIMS (Krishna Institute of Medical Sciences) Hospitals in Mahadevapura in a critical condition from another hospital following a road traffic accident.

For seven days, a multidisciplinary team led by Dr Gurudutt AV, Head of Paediatric Services and Paediatric Intensivist (PICU and Paediatric Emergency), and Dr Raghuram Gopalakrishnan, Director and Senior Consultant, Head of Stereotactic and Functional Neurosurgery, provided intensive neuroprotection measures and advanced life support, KIMS Hospital said in a statement. However, the boy was confirmed brain dead on 24 February.

"After obtaining due consent from the parents, the government coordinated the retrieval of two corneas, two kidneys, one liver and four heart valves," Dr Gurudutt said, praising the parents for their bravery. —*PTI*

The boy was injured in a car crash and despite the doctor's best efforts was declared brain dead on 24 February *AI*

Court acquits Sanjay Raut in defamation case

MUMBAI, 26 FEB

A session's court in Mumbai has acquitted Shiv Sena (UBT) Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Raut in a criminal defamation case filed by Medha Somaiya, wife of BJP leader Kirit Somaiya. Somaiya had accused Raut of making baseless allegations in the media, claiming she and her husband were involved in a Rs 100 crore scam linked to public toilet construction in the Mira-Bhayander area.

A magistrate last year convicted Raut under IPC Section 500, sentencing him to 15 days in jail and fining him Rs 25,000, though the sentence was suspended pending appeal. Allowing the leader's revision plea, the session's court set aside the conviction after hearing arguments from both sides.—*PTI*

Shankaracharya files case against accuser

VARANASI/ PRAYAGRAJ, 26 FEB

Swami Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati, booked for allegedly sexually abusing two persons, including a minor, has filed a case against accuser Ashutosh Brahmachari under the POCSO Act, claiming legal action can be taken against false complaints.

Avimukteshwaranand has also approached the Allahabad High Court seeking anticipatory bail, with the plea scheduled for Friday. The FIR, lodged at Jhunsi police station, names him, his disciple Mukundanand Brahmachari, and two to three unidentified persons. The complainants alleged abuse at a gurukul and during religious gatherings, including the Magh Mela in Prayagraj.

ACP Vimal Kishore Mishra confirmed medical examinations of the victims have been conducted and reports submitted to the investigating officer.—*PTI*

FIR says Kerala Min was attacked with 'weapon' during stir

KOCHI, 26 FEB

An FIR has been registered after Kerala Health Minister Veena George was allegedly attacked by activists of the Kerala Students Union (KSU) at Kannur railway station. According to the complaint filed by her gunman, the activists waved black flags, shouted slogans and allegedly struck the minister on the neck with a "weapon" while she was preparing to board the Vande Bharat Express on Wednesday afternoon. The gunman was also reportedly restrained when he intervened. Five KSU activists were arrested and remanded to judicial custody. The case has been registered under provisions of BNS and Railway Act.—*PTI*

—X@MOHUAMOITRA

Moitra, EC top official spar over WhatsApp orders

KOLKATA, 26 FEB

A war of words broke out between Trinamool Congress MP Mahua Moitra and electoral roll observer CS Murugan over allegations related to the micro-observers' role in electoral roll revisions. The controversy began on 18 February when Moitra, on X, said the official was overstepping his mandate. "Please control your Roll Observer .... issuing incorrect directions on secret WhatsApp groups to micro observers.," she wrote, sharing an image referencing a film character and wrote the caption 'Quick Gun Murugan'. "I don't have as many guns as depicted in the picture. However, I was trained to handle different types of ...," Murugan said in a counter post on social media handle.—*PTI*

India eyes Israeli technology for 'Sudarshan Chakra'

Israel to transfer tech to India in $10B deal

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu donned an Indian outfit to surprise PM Narendra Modi during their meeting in Jerusalem on 25 February—*PTI*

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Israel visit is a shot in the arm for India's plan to build a multi-layered air defence shield, Sudarshan Chakra. A major deal reportedly worth $10 billion may include the transfer of Israel's military technology, including those of the Iron Dome and Iron Beam air defence systems.

Modi had announced the AI-driven, multi-layered air defence shield on 15 August, 2025. New Delhi considers this vital to protect India's 15,106 km land frontier and 7,516 km coastline. The Iron Dome would help counter Pakistani drones and China's swarm drone strategy.

Operational since 2011, Iron Dome is a mobile, all-weather system designed to intercept short-range rockets and artillery shells, with a reported success rate of around 90 per cent. Iron Beam, developed by Rafael Advanced Defence Systems and Elbit Systems, is a 100kW high-energy laser weapon capable of neutralising rockets, mortars and drones at an estimated cost of about $2 per shot. It is described as the world's first operational high-energy laser air defence system.

Although developed indigenously over three decades, Iron Beam's industrialisation has been strongly backed by the United States. Iron Dome was also heavily co-funded by Washington, with roughly half of its interceptors manufactured in the US. Any transfer of such technology to India could therefore involve complex clearances.

Israel may consider sharing advanced systems and co-developing capabilities with India, including anti-ballistic missile defence, long-range stand-off missiles and drones. Reports suggest talks on systems such as Arrow, David's Sling, SPICE 1,000 guidance kits, Rampage missiles, Ice Breaker cruise missiles with a range of up to 300km, and Air LORA supersonic missile with 430km reach.

India already operates S-400, Barak and indigenous Akash missile systems. Indian officials believe that integrating advanced Israeli technologies into the Sudarshan Chakra would enhance India's defence in the wake of Operation Sindoor. —*Salar News*

BJP will win WB, drive out all infiltrators: Shah

ARARIA, 26 FEB

Union Home Minister Amit Shah exuded confidence that the BJP will win the assembly polls in West Bengal, and "drive out all infiltrators" from the state, which was among the ones "worst affected by demographic change."

Shah was speaking in the Araria district of Bihar on Thursday, where he launched projects worth Rs 175 crore of the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) and dedicated to the nation new border outposts.

"It is the top priority of the BJP government to drive out every infiltrator from the country, who are not just a threat to national security, but also feed on welfare benefits meant for our people," he said.

"Infiltration on a large scale also results in encroachments in bordering areas. We are committed to demolishing these. Infiltration also poses the threat of demographic change, which can wreak havoc with culture and geography," Shah said.

The Modi government has decided to set up a high-powered committee to study and "undo demographic change," by identifying the most vulnerable areas, the home minister said.

The BJP, which had been a marginal power in West Bengal until a decade ago, has now emerged as the principal challenger to the Trinamool Congress headed by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. — *PTI*

US Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick, Union Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal and US Ambassador to India Sergio Gor during a meeting —*PTI*

Goyal meets US officials as trade impasse continues

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

Piyush Goyal on Thursday described as "fruitful" his meeting with US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick and US Ambassador to India Sergio Gor, amid efforts to advance a bilateral trade agreement.

The unannounced meeting assumes significance as both sides seek to finalise the legal text of the first phase of an interim trade pact. It followed a US Supreme Court ruling striking down President Donald Trump's sweeping global tariffs terming them illegal and beyond presidential authority.

Chief negotiators were due to meet in Washington this week, but talks were postponed after the ruling created fresh uncertainty. The US has since imposed a 10 per cent tariff on all countries for 150 days from 24 February; Trump has indicated a possible rise to 15 per cent, though no order has been issued.

Earlier, Washington levied a 25 per cent reciprocal tariff on India, later doubling it to 50 per cent over Russian crude purchases. This month, both nations agreed on a framework to reduce tariffs to 18 per cent under an interim deal.

Meanwhile, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi alleged Trump pressured Prime Minister Narendra Modi into a deal that would harm Indian farmers by opening markets to highly mechanised American agriculture. —*PTI*

Carney eyes Indian tech to reduce US reliance

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

India said the talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Canadian counterpart Mark Carney next week will provide an opportunity to advance a forward-looking partnership between the two nations.

Carney is visiting India as he seeks to wean Canada off its economic dependency on the US.

Carney's office said the trip would also focus energy, AI, defence, critical minerals, maritime security and food security.

Carney has repeatedly stated his objective of doubling Canada's non-US exports by the next decade, in response to the tariffs imposed by President Trump on key Canadian exports like metals and cars.

The US is by far Canada's largest customer, buying around 75% of Canadian exports.

Earlier this year, Carney broke from US trade policy by removing tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles, in exchange for China lowering retaliatory tariffs on Canadian agricultural products.

He also made global headlines for calling on countries to reject economic "coercion" by "great powers," widely interpreted as a dig at Trump.

The visit is aimed at imparting a n momentum to the bilateral ties. — *PTI*

2024 LANDSLIDES

Gandhis lay foundation of Wayanad victims' homes

WAYANAD, 26 FEB

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Thursday laid the foundation stone for 100 houses to be built by the party for victims of the 2024 Wayanad landslides.

The Congress will construct 100 houses, each measuring 1,100 sq ft on eight cents of land, for families affected by the disaster in Meppadi panchayat. Assuring continued support, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha said he and his family would always stand by those who had lost everything.

"You have lost a lot, but not your spirit, courage or compassion," he said, recalling how people responded to two major landslides he had witnessed.

Referring to concerns raised by Priyanka Gandhi Vadra over alleged delays due to land and permission issues, Gandhi expressed hope that construction would now be completed soon. He termed the ceremony a "symbol and message" of solidarity.

AICC Secretary Mansoor Ali Khan with Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and Wayanad MP Priyanka Gandhi in Wayanad in Kerala on Thursday —*SALAR*

Priyanka said she had seen the hardship of families, including locals Anyan and Hanni, who lost relatives and farms.

She said Congress MPs met the Home Minister, wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and staged protests seeking national disaster status.

The landslides that occured on 30 July, 2024 were triggered by extreme monsoon rain. It killed over 420 people and injured nearly 400. —*PTI*

HC issues notice to Assam CM for 'hate speech'

GUWAHATI, 26 FEB

The Gauhati High Court issued a notice to Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday following multiple Public Interest Litigations (PILs).

The petitions allege that Sarma engaged in "hate speech" and made "communal comments" targeting the 'Miya' community. The court fixed 21 March as the next date of hearing.

A division bench comprising Chief Justice Ashutosh Kumar and Justice Arun Dev Choudhury heard the three petitions issued to the state government and the Director-General of Police (DGP) in connection with three different petitions linked to the matter.

One plea was filed on 24 February by Assamese litterateur Hiren Gohain, former DGP Harekrishna Deka and journalist Paresh Malakar. The CPI and CPI(M) filed separate petitions on 21 February to prohibit the Chief Minister from making similar statements targeting a community.

On February 16, the Supreme Court declined to hear petitions seeking action against the Chief Minister over a viral video allegedly showing him aiming and firing a rifle at members of the Miya community.

'Miya' was originally a derogatory term for Bengali-speaking Muslims residing in the state.

Howeve, the term has in recent years been reclaimed by some activists in the state as an assertion of identity of the Muslim community residing in Assam. —*PTI*

ASSAM LAUNCHES CASH BENEFIT SCHEMES FOR 1L STUDENTS

GUWAHATI, 26 FEB

Ahead of Assembly polls, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday launched schemes providing cash benefits to nearly one lakh students and researchers.

The Jibon Prerana scheme offers Rs 2,500 per month for a year to 48,319 fresh graduates. Jibon Anuprerana will give one-time assistance of Rs 25,000–40,000 to 2,112 researchers, including Divyang scholars.

The Mukhya Mantrir Nijut Babu Asoni scheme provides monthly support to 47,395 first-year undergraduate and postgraduate students. Under the existing Nijut Moina scheme, girl students from class 11 to post-graduation receive stipends up to Rs 2,500 to prevent child marriages and reduce dropouts. Elections to 126 constituencies are expected in March–April. —*PTI*

IYC workers sent to police custody after standoff

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

A Delhi court has remanded three Youth Congress workers brought from Shimla to police custody after a 24-hour standoff between Delhi police and Himachal Pradesh police.

The accused, arrested over a shirtless protest at the AI Impact Summit last week, will be in police custody for three days.

Chief Judicial Magistrate Mridul Gupta granted the police's plea for five-day custodial interrogation, with the accused to be produced again on 1 March. The accused—Saurabh and Arbaz Khan from Uttar Pradesh and Sidharth Avdhut of Madhya Pradesh—were arrested from a Himachal resort around 6.40am on Wednesday and produced before a Shimla magistrate at 1.40pm the same day.

The magistrate allowed transit remand to Delhi Police, who seek to investigate the conspiracy, including the origin of the T-shirts and the WhatsApp group created by Saurabh.

The defence argued that the police were engaged in political targeting, claiming no recovery had been made and comparing the case to the JNU incident. The court also extended the custody of two other accused, Ajay Kumar and Raja Gujar, arrested earlier.

The arrests led to a standoff, with the Delhi Police team detained for about five hours after securing transit remand, before being allowed to leave with the accused. —*PTI*

HINDUS PROTECT MUSLIM STUDENTS PRAYING AT LUCKNOW UNIVERSITY

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

Lucknow University students affiliated with different organisations and belonging to different faiths formed a human chain to protect Muslim students offering namaz outside the Lal Baradari on 22 February.

The move came after the university allegedly sealed the mosque inside Lal Baradari to prevent the Muslim students from offering prayers during the holy month of Ramzan.

The Samajwadi Chhatra Sabha (SCS), the National Students' Union of India (NSUI), and the All India Students' Association (AISA) organised a sit-in protest, forming a human chain to allow their Muslim friends to pray outside Lal Baradari, as the gates of the mosque were closed.

The gesture is described as 'Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb,' and several said that it is not the place for discrimination on the basis of religion or caste.

"Without any prior information to the Muslim students who offer prayers during the holy month of Ramzan, the historic structure was sealed," SCS representative Navneet Kumar stated.

. The university's spokesperson, Mukul Srivastava said that the building is in a dilapidated condition. It was sealed after a wall collapse—*Agencies*

CELEBRATING HOLI & RAMADAN

Stay home if you dislike colours: UP cop to Muslims

The SP said Muslims can break fast with gujiya made by Hindu —*ANI*

GONDA, 26 FEB

An officer of the Uttar Pradesh Police here has advised those who are averse to colours to stay at home as a precaution during Holi.

As the month of Ramadan and Holi are being observed simultaneously, Gonda additional superintendent of police Radheshyam Rai appealed to Muslims to present an example of communal harmony.

The appeal was made at a peace committee meeting held at the Colonelganj Police Station here to ensure the peaceful celebration of the festival.

"..... it is Holi and the person in front is our brother, and we apply colours," he said, adding that people usually say, "Bura na mano, Holi hai," while applying colours.

Rai said some people remain in a celebratory mood on the day of the festival and may not be in a position to heed advice at that time, making it safer for those who object to colours to avoid venturing out.

The police officer also suggested that Muslim residents could break their fast with "gujiya" offered by their Hindu neighbours as a gesture of goodwill.

Representatives of the Muslim community welcomed the appeal.

Nasib Ali, a resident said such gesture promotes mutual brotherhood and that it should not cause any difficulty to anyone.

Police and political figures in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have faced backlash for advising Muslims to 'stay indoors during Holi if they do not wish to be coloured.

Critics argue such statements are discriminatory and promote segregation rather than secular harmony in the society. —*PTI*

—SCREENGRAB

Kerala RTC bus hits shop after driver suffers heart attack

ALAPPUZHA, 26 FEB

A KSRTC bus in Kerala's Alappuzha collided with a shop after the driver, Pradeep, suffered a suspected cardiac arrest. The incident occurred at around 9 am on the route from Pathanamthitta to Mavelikara. The bus went out of control at Nadakkavu and crashed into a roadside shop. Although no injuries were reported, Pradeep was rushed to a private hospital in Parumala, where he later died. Police believe a cardiac arrest caused the accident and will register a case and investigate. The driver's health condition is suspected to have led to the crash, police said. —*PTI*

—WIKICOMMONS

FIR lodged over torch-lit filming in M'rashtra temple

CHHATRAPATI SAMBHAJINAGAR, 26 FEB

Police registered a case against five unidentified individuals for endangering a protected monument in Maharashtra. Suspected of filming inside the Maheshwar Temple at Patnadevi using torches and flammable liquids, they allegedly damaged the site. Videos surfaced showing the group lighting torches within the temple, including the sanctum sanctorum, and tying cloth to pipes. The Archaeological Survey of India found black spots and burn damage on the temple's floor and pillars after inspection. The FIR was filed on February 17 based on a complaint from an ASI staff member, with social media profiles being sought for further investigation. —*PTI*

—ANI

Kerala HC probes 'Padi Pooja' booking

KOCHI, 26 FEB

The Kerala High Court has taken note of suspected irregularities in the 'Padi Pooja' at Sabarimala's Lord Ayyappa temple. The court directed the Chief Vigilance Officer to seize all records related to the ritual. A vigilance enquiry revealed unauthorised transfer of 'Padi Pooja' bookings made with false addresses. The court highlighted the ritual's significance and the demand, noting bookings extend to 2045. The court called the conduct of fake bookings disturbing and ordered the records to be produced. —*PTI*

Kerala HC stays release of 'The Kerala Story 2'

Film was to release on 27 Feb; HC calls out Censor Board

KOCHI, 26 FEB

The Kerala High Court granted an interim stay on Thursday for 15 days against the release of the film 'The Kerala Story 2-Goes Beyond,' saying that prima facie there is non-application of mind by the Censor Board while certifying the movie.

Justice Bechu Kurian Thomas passed the order on two pleas challenging the release of the film.

The film was scheduled to be released on 27 February.

The court said that the guideline that a film should not disrupt social harmony appears not to have been followed by the CBFC.

It also said that dissemination of content, which can create discord cannot come within the gamut of freedom of speech and expression enshrined in Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution.

The court directed the Centre to pass orders within two weeks from Thursday on a revision petition moved by one of the petitioners, Sreedev Namboodiri, against the movie's certification.

The court said the Centre has to give an opportunity of hearing to the petitioner, the CBFC and the producer, Vipul Amrutlal Shah, before passing any order on the revision petition.

"Meanwhile, there will be an interim stay on the release of the film 'The Kerala Story 2-Goes Beyond,' and the respondent 2 (CBFC) and respondent 3 (Shah) must ensure that the movie is not released for public viewing for 13 days from today," the court said.

Besides quashing the movie's certification, Namboodiri's plea filed through advocate Maitreyi Sachidananda Hegde had also sought modifications, including reconsideration of the film's title. — *PTI*

The HC directed the Centre to decide its stand within two weeks on a petition moved by Sreedev Namboodiri, against the movie's certification —*ANI*

> The Kerala HC said that the dissemination of any content, which can create discord and disharmony in society, is not covered by Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution which guarantees freedom of speech and expression

IT'S INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

'Digital platforms must share revenue with content makers'

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw asserted that digital platforms must take responsibility for the content they host and ensure fair revenue sharing with content creators, cautioning that innovation will suffer if creators are denied due compensation.

Addressing the Digital News Publishers Association (DNPA) Conclave here on Thursday, he also underlined the need to regulate the use of AI-generated content, saying such material should not be generated without the consent of the person whose face, voice or personality is used.

He stressed that intellectual property must be fairly compensated, noting that society's progress in science, technology, arts, and literature depends on it. Digital platforms, he said, should ensure fair revenue sharing not just with news organisations but also with independent creators. He said digital platforms need to "wake up" and understand the importance of reinforcing trust in the institutions that society built over thousands of years.

Vaishnav said that society is struggling with online safety, authenticity of news content, safety of children and protection against artificially created fake content.

Similarly, he said, every institution is based on trust. However, the way the world is evolving, this is under threat, particularly from emerging technologies like deep fakes that can make people believe in events that never occurred, he said. — *PTI*

Telangana CID arrests Falcon ex-COO in Rs 792 cr scam

HYDERABAD, 26 FEB

The Telangana CID has arrested the former chief operating officer (COO) of the Falcon Group in connection with the Rs 792 crore deposit "fraud."

Vikas Kumar Sakhare, who played an active role in the offence, was arrested at his residence here on Wednesday, CID Additional Director General Charu Sinha said in a releas.

The case pertains to "unauthorised" collection of deposits through which the accused "cheated" the depositors, by developing the Falcon Invoice Discounting Application and by creating fake deals in the names of reputed MNCs induced depositors by offering high interest rates and collected about Rs 4,215 crore from 7,056 depositors.

Out of that, 4,065 people were cheated of Rs 792 crore by the Capital Protection Force Private Ltd, working under Falcon Invoice Discounting App, it said. Based on the complaints of victims, three cases were registered under BNS and the Telangana State Protection of Depositors of Financial Establishment Act, 1999, by the Economic Offences Wing (EOW) of Cyberabad Police Commissionerate.

The company M/s Capital Protection Force Pvt Ltd, developed the Falcon Invoice Discounting Application and advertised through social media platforms. They created fake deals in the name of MNCs, collected crores from depositors and issued receipts. Sakhare, named as accused 27, colluded with the main accused Amar Deep Kumar, the MD of the Falcon Group to attract depositors.

The funds collected were diverted into various shell companies. By 15 January 2025, the scheme collapsed, promised returns were halted, and the office in Hyderabad was shut down. — *PTI*

The case pertains to the "unauthorised" collection of deposits through which the accused "cheated" the depositors —*FALCON*

MP Bandhavgarh reserve lost 8 tigers in 2.5 months

JABALPUR, 26 FEB

The Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve lost eight tigers, including the four electrocuted, in two and a half months in 2025 and early 2026, according to a report submitted to the Madhya Pradesh HC.

The status report submitted by the field director of the protected forest said that four tigers died within the tiger reserve, and four in the "general forest area."

The cause of death of all the four tigers within the tiger reserve was natural, while electrocution killed the remaining four in the general forest area, the report said, adding that the carcasses of all the big cats were completely intact.

The report was submitted to a division bench of the High Court on Wednesday in response to a petition that claimed big cat deaths under suspicious circumstances in MP's forests.

The court directed the petitioners to submit a response to the status report and scheduled the next hearing for 25 March.

As per the report, eight tigers died in the Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve between 21 November 2025 and 2 February.

Inside the tiger reserve, two tigers died due to conflicts. While one big cat drowned in a well, another succumbed to an infectious disease, it said. In the forest area, four tigers were electrocuted. — *PTI*

'Army' offered to 'wipe out' trial, says ISIS case accused

MUMBAI, 26 FEB

An ISIS link case accused has claimed that two persons posing as Army officers approached him and offered to "wipe out" his trial if he joined a covert operation, prompting a court here to seek responses from the NIA and the police.

Areeb Majeed, arrested in 2014 under the anti-terror law and facing trial, filed an application before the court stating that he wants his case to be decided on merit.

Special NIA Court Judge Chakor Baviskar issued a notice to the Bazar Peth police (Thane district) and the NIA on Wednesday The matter has been adjourned to 4 March.

The application filed by Majeed said that his wife informed him that a man and a woman had arrived at his residence in Kalyan on 21 February.

The woman, claiming to be from the Army, told Majeed that she was accompanied by a Colonel-rank officer. — *PTI*

Goa launches 'Sagar Safar' to promote beach safety

PANAJI, 26 FEB

The Goa government has launched a new guided sea-swimming programme called 'Sagar Safar', aimed at raising awareness about beach safety among visitors and tourists. The initiative educates participants on sea dynamics, including wave types, rip currents, and flag signals used on beaches. It also guides swimmers on identifying safe and unsafe zones in the ocean, according to a senior official from the state tourism department.

Led by Chief Minister Dr Pramod Sawant and in collaboration with Drishti Marine lifesaving services, 'Sagar Safar' aims to promote confidence and preparedness for ocean activities.

The programme is conducted daily at 11am and 4pm at beaches including Baga, Calangute, Sinquerim, Candolim, Benaulim and Colva. Sessions are supervised by trained lifeguards, with participants provided with safety gear such as life jackets.

The government emphasised that the initiative forms part of its broader strategy to enhance beach safety.

Participants shared positive experiences; Sakshi Verekar said, "Since childhood, I was very scared of sea waves and felt anxious about going into deep water. However, I always wanted to experience the deep sea. This experience turned out to be very good for me, and I would advise everyone to try it at least once." — *PTI*

The project educates people about sea dynamics and wave types —*PTI*

Delhi court grants bail in Turkman Gate case

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

A court in Delhi has granted bail to six men accused of stone-pelting during a demolition drive near the Faiz-e-Elahi mosque in Turkman Gate last month.

Additional Sessions Judge Bhupinder Singh released Mohammad Faiz, Mohammad Affan, Mohammed Imran, Shahzad, Mohammad Imran and Mohammad Faheem on a personal bond of Rs 50,000 each with one surety. The court said it had balanced the gravity of the allegations with the right to liberty under Article 21 of the Constitution. The judge noted that video did not clearly establish the accused's identities and those they were not arrested at the scene but later during the investigation.

It added that mere presence in a crowd does not justify pre-trial detention.

The court also cited parity with the 12 co-accused granted bail earlier. — *PTI*

HEARING ON 10 MARCH

SC seeks M'rashtra govt response in Porsche case bail application

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

The Supreme Court of India has sought a response from the Maharashtra government on a bail plea filed by Vishal Agarwal, father of the minor accused in the 2024 Pune Porsche crash.

On 19 May 2024, a 17-year-old boy allegedly driving a Porsche under the influence of alcohol fatally struck two Information Technology professionals in Pune's Kalyani Nagar area, triggering widespread outrage all over the country.

A Bench of Justices BV Nagarathna and Ujjal Bhuyan issued notice to the state after Agarwal challenged the Bombay High Court order rejecting his bail.

The case is now listed for a detailed hearing from both sides on 10 March.

On 19 May 2024, a 17-year-old boy who was driving a Porsche after allegedly consuming alcohol, fatally hit two Information Technology professionals in Pune —*PTI*

Earlier this month, the Supreme Court court granted bail to three co-accused, observing that parents must take responsibility in road accident cases involving juveniles, particularly as they had spent 18 months in custody.

The controversy intensified after the Juvenile Justice Board initially granted the minor involved in the accident bail on very lenient terms, including writing a 300-word essay on how to ensure road safety. The order was later revised by the Juvenile Justice Board, and he was sent to an observation home before being released by the HC. — *PTI*

TACTICAL MOVE

IPS officer Sumathi played key role in Maoist's surrender

HYDERABAD, 26 FEB

When B Sumathi, a saree-clad officer, sat on the dais along with Telangana DGP B Shivadhar Reddy, few onlookers realised that she was the silent architect of the historic event unfolding before them.

On Tuesday, top Maoist commander Thippiri Tirupati alias Devuji and other Maoist leaders laid down their arms.

As the head of the Special Intelligence Branch (SIB) of the Telangana Police, Sumathi oversaw the delicate negotiations to bring the ultras back into the mainstream.

Devuji, a key Central Committee member of the proscribed organisation and a politburo member of the Maoist party, along with another central committee member, Malla Raji Reddy, and two other senior Maoist cadres, formally surrendered in the presence of DGP B Shivadhar Reddy on Tuesday.

Addressing the media during Devuji's surrender, DGP Shivadhaeddy made a special mention of Sumathi and her team.

"They (Devuji and other Maoists) surrendered because of the efforts of SIB IG Sumathi and the SIB team. They (SIB team) played a crucial role in helping them understand the circumstances," Reddy said.

The DGP also hailed IGP Intelligence Vijay Kumar.

"The SIB team carried out a very professional intelligence work to ensure the surrender of the senior ltras as they would become "martyrs" if they lose their lives in encounters and become "heroes" if they are arrested, but would become "zeroes" if they surrendered," police said.

Sumathi oversaw the surrender of 591 Maoist leaders and cadres before the Telangana Police over the past two years. — *PTI*

Telangana IPS officer B Sumathi seen with Devuji (extreme left) after his surrender and other police officials —*X/TELANGANADGP*

2 NAXALS KILLED IN C'GARH'S BIJAPUR

Two Naxalites were killed in an encounter with security forces in the Bijapur district of Chhattisgarh on Thursday, police said. The encounter broke out in a forest along the Indravati River in the morning when security forces was out on an anti-Naxalite operation, a senior police official said.

After guns fell silent, the bodies of two Naxalites, clad in uniform, along with an SLR, an Insas rifle and a 12-bore rifle were recovered, he said. — PTI

PROCESSED FOOD IS SAFE, SAYS PASWAN

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

Food Processing Industries Minister Chirag Paswan has highlighted that social media influencers are spreading a false narrative claiming processed food is harmful, and emphasised the need for a collective effort to counter this misinformation.

Addressing the inaugural session of ANVESH-2026, a three-day international conference organised by NIFTEM-K, Paswan stated that the perception that "processed food means not good" is being actively promoted online, both domestically and globally.

He explained that this narrative affects the sector's growth and called for decisive action. Paswan noted that ready-to-cook and ready-to-eat products have become essential in modern lifestyles, especially with the rise of nuclear families and working couples. "Earlier, we used to prepare chutney and sauces at home, but we need them readily prepared. If a false narrative is set, we cannot see the kind of growth we envision," he said.

The minister revealed that his ministry has formed a committee on misleading advertisements, which recently discussed ways to combat such messaging. He urged industry leaders to take ownership, proposing that each could onboard one or two influencers to help correct the narrative.

He also mentioned India's free trade agreements with over 127 countries and dismissed fears of concessions, asserting deals are made on India's terms. — *PTI*

HOUSE OF CARDS

1,400 houses were demolished during a two-day mega drive in Rajkot city in Gujarat to reclaim land worth Rs 350 crore on Wednesday. The drive also cleared homes on the rivers bank, and was the largest in Rajkot. Although the administration claimed that the properties were being used for criminal activities, the hundreds of families displaced said they now have nowhere to go, with their homes destroyed —PTI

Census 2027 to be a fully digitised exercise

The Census 2027, which will recast the decennial headcount as a fully digital enterprise, will have at its heart the Census Management and Monitoring System (CMMS) - a dedicated digital portal engineered to orchestrate one of the largest administrative exercises in the world.

Marking a decisive break from the paper-bound enumeration, the portal will replace clipboards and carbon copies with handheld devices, geotagged mapping tools and a centralised web-based command platform in what will be India's first fully digital Census.

The bespoke software backbone, designed to monitor the exercise in near real time, will allow 3.2 million field functionaries -- enumerators and supervisors -- to capture a granular demographic, social and economic data from hundreds of millions of households using handheld devices.

The data can be transmitted, aggregated, and validated through the CMMS architecture, significantly reducing the time required for compilation and error correction.

"The ensuing Census 2027 will make extensive use of digital technology to enhance the quality, efficiency, and timeliness of data collection and dissemination. Data will be collected through digital mode, marking a significant and transformative step towards the modernisation of the Census process," Registrar General of India Mrityunjay Kumar Narayan said in a circular addressed to Chief Secretaries of all states and Union Territories.

The circular, seen by PTI, says that the CMMS will facilitate end-to-end management of the Census operations, including creation of users at various levels, handling of training modules, creation of houselisting blocks (HLB) and its description and supervisory circles, allocation of supervisory circles and HLBs, the generation of appointment letter and ID cards of enumerators and supervisors, among others.

At least 3.2 million functionaries will be monitored in real time through the Census Management and Monitoring System —AI

It said the CMMS also enables role-based access control to facilitate appointments, training, and near-real-time monitoring of Census field operations.

The software will include a web-based mapping application that facilitates the geo-tagging of houselisting blocks, effectively marrying spatial data with demographic enumeration.

The digital mapping tools will help the officials to delineate boundaries with greater precision, reducing overlaps and omissions, officials in the know of the developments said.

Geo-tagging is expected to enhance data integrity, creating a valuable digital spatial archive for planning, disaster management, and infrastructure development long after the census tables are compiled.

The Union Cabinet has approved Rs 11,718 crore for the 16th Census since Independence, which would include caste enumeration for the first time.

Originally scheduled for 2021, the decadal exercise was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Census will be conducted in two phases: house-listing and housing census from April to September 2026, and population enumeration (PE) in February 2027.

The RGI has provided a list of 33 questions that will be asked of citizens during the first phase of the Census -- houselisting and housing census -- starting April 1.

The housing listing and housing census systematically list all structures, houses, and households throughout the country to provide a sound framework for the conduct of the population enumeration.

To ensure equitable distribution of work among field enumerators during the houslisting operations, a village or ward of the town will be divided into 'blocks', which will be well-defined areas that can be clearly demarcated on the ground and for which a map will be drawn for the Census operations.

"Such blocks created for HLO and population enumeration (PE) are called houselisting blocks (HLBs) and enumeration blocks (EBs), respectively. The HLBs/EBs would ultimately be the smallest administrative unit for conducting the Census and would form the basis for processing of data after the field operations are over," another circular issued by RGI Mrityunjay Kumar Narayan recently said.

An HLB is to be created in accordance with the criteria for a population of 700-800 for residential areas. In sparsely populated non-residential areas, one HLB may be formed by taking 300 or more Census houses, it said.

"For the first time, the creation and demarcation of HLBs, formation of SC and allocation of enumerators and supervisors for the HLBs and SCs will be carried out through the Census Monitoring and Management System (CMMS) portal and HLB Census of India 2027-Circular No. 10 Page 5 of 12 Creator (HLBC) Web Mapping Application, respectively," it said. —PTI

SALAR ساہر

Nehru flagged issues of Israeli state to Einstein

- In a letter to Einstein in 1947, Nehru wrote that "why have they (Jewish people) failed to gain the goodwill of the Arabs? Why do they want to compel the Arabs to submit against their will to certain demands". Einstein, who had been offered Israeli Presidency but declined it, was urging Nehru to endorse the creation of an Israeli state, saying that it would bring benefits to Palestinians.

During his speech at the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, Prime Minister Narendra Modi cheerfully remarked that he was born on the same day that India recognised Israel as a state – 17 September, 1950. The statement drew both domestic and international backlash, because they come after Israel's devasting attacks on Gaza killed at least 72,000 people.

Congress General Secretary in-charge Communications Jairam Ramesh called Modi's remarks an "unabashed defence of his host" in a statement on X and drew attention to letters between India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru and scientist Albert Einstein.

Nehru and Einstein exchanged several letters between 1947 and 1955 on the subject of the of the creation of Israel, Ramesh noted.

Einstein, who was offered Presidency of Israel in 1952, which he declined, was attempting to urge Nehru to endorse the Israeli state. Einstein said the Jewish people "like the untouchables, have been the victims of persecution and discrimination for centuries".

Einstein noted that after World War 1, the Allies gave the Arabs 99 per cent of Arab lands liberated from the Ottoman Empire. However, only 1 per cent was reserved for Jewish people s "in the land of their origin".

"In the august scale of justice, which weighs need against need, there is no doubt as to whose is more-heavy," Einstein wrote. Einstein added that an Israeli state would also bring economic benefits to Palestinians.

However, Nehru did not appear to agree with Einstein.

"The problem of Palestine, you will no doubt agree with me, is extraordinarily difficult and intricate. Where rights come into conflict it is not an easy matter to decide.

With all our sympathy for the Jews we must and do feel that the rights and future of the Arabs are involved in this question. You have yourself framed the question: Can Jewish need, no matter how acute, be met without the infringement of the vital rights of others?" Nehru wrote.

"Your answer to this question is in the affirmative. Broadly put, many may agree with you in that answer, but when we come to the specific application of this answer, the matter is not at all simple," he added.

"I do not myself see how this problem can be resolved by violence and conflict on one side or the other. Even if such violence and conflict achieve certain ends for the moment, they must necessarily be temporary. I do earnestly hope that some kind of an agreement might be arrived at between the Arabs and the Jews. I do not think even an outside power can impose its will for long or enforce some new arrangement against the will of the parties concerned," he added.

Nehru confessed that despite his reading about the region, he was by no means an expert. But he said that one question lingered.

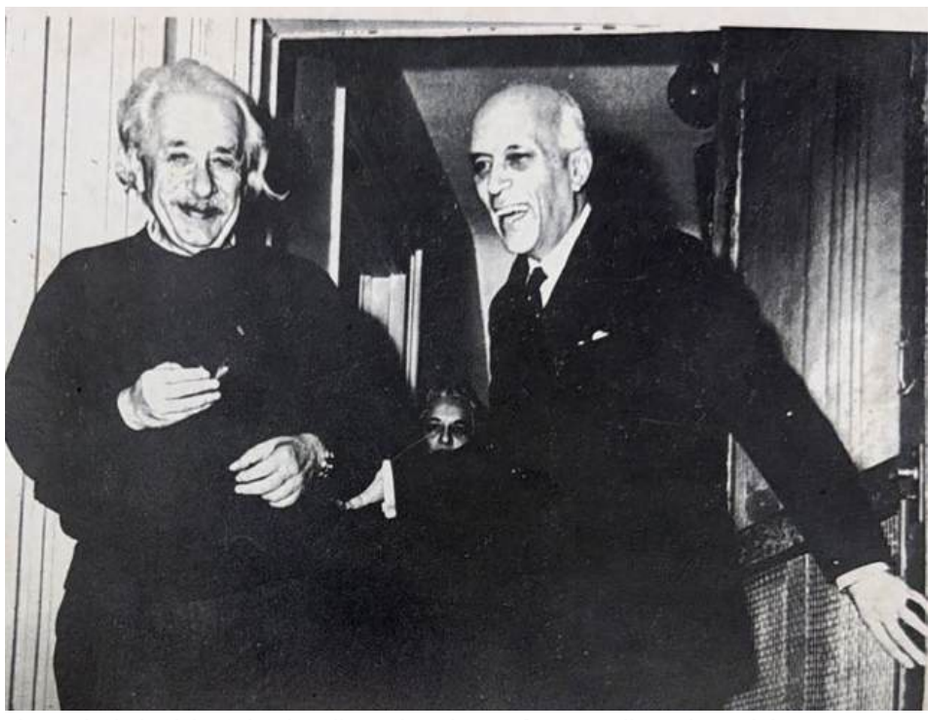
"I know that the Jews have done a wonderful piece of work in Palestine and have raised the standards of the people there, but one question troubles me. After all these remarkable achievements, why have they failed to gain the goodwill of the Arabs? Why do they want to compel the Arabs to submit against their will to certain demands?" he wrote.

Nehru said that the chief difficulty was the rule of the British in Palestine.

Notably, India was the first non-Arab country to recognise a Palestinian state in 1988.

When India officially recognised Israel, Nehru said that: "We would have long ago, because Israel is a fact. We refrained because of our desire not to offend the sentiments of our friends in the Arab countries."

Ramesh noted that Nehru and Einstein met on 5 November, 1949, at the latter's Einstein's house in Princeton. —*Salar News*



Theoretical physicist Scientist Albert Einstein met former Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru at the former's Princeton home in 1949 —X @JAIRAM_RAMESH

LETTERS

write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

Nepalese parties battle for social media dominance ahead of polls

Nepal's 2026 election campaign is taking a hybrid approach, combining traditional grassroots mobilisation with advanced digital strategies. This blend is crucial in navigating the high-stakes political environment following the 2025 Gen Z led uprising.

The businesses in the printing presses, which used to go into frenzy and be busy preparing the election campaign materials, but this time, the area is eerily silent. The smell of printing inks has become thinner this year as the orders have slumped in comparison to those of the year 2022.

Bijay Kumar Karki is one of those who has been running the business of printing, which, during the election time are busy making the campaign materials. From the party flags to the badges, caps, banners and other miniature items- it should have been a busy time for him, but this year the business has reduced.

"In my business of forty years, at the time of election we used to make hand-made banners, but after the ban on it, the technique shifted to using the screen prints," Karki told ANI. "In terms of the business of the flags, the number (of orders) has dived. In the previous election of 2022, there was high demand, but this time it has slumped."

The basic essence of the election campaign, as per the printers, was a means to raise awareness as well as establish one's image, but with time, it has undergone a drastic change.

This has been mainly attributed to the transition from traditional means of campaigning to digital means, especially social media. Candidates in Nepal now are shifting their appeals for votes from door-to-door to social media feeds.

Parties and candidates standing in the fray for next week's parliamentary election have ensured their presence on all fronts to reach out to the voters, changing the dynamics of the election campaigning.

The political parties and candidates are now running ads on social media through paid promotion services to reach out to larger audience. As per Facebook's Ad library report from 25 November to 22 February, 2026, a total of 16, 453 USD has been spent from Bagmati Zone, which includes the capital Kathmandu, only to boost the political, social or elections ads.

This change in the pattern of campaigning comes in line with the adoption of new election ethics by the electoral body. The Election Commission, Nepal, has adopted ethical guidelines which limit the size of the flag, numbers and other materials that were previously used during the campaign.

Rapper-turned Kathmandu Mayor Balendra Shah is set to contest against former prime minister KP Sharma Oli from Jhapa-5 -FB@BALEN/ X@KPSHARMAOLI

The commission had partnered with Meta and TikTok in the 2022 local elections to regulate political ads, tracking spending and content transparency. Since then, Facebook's Ad Library has included Nepal, providing public access to expenditure and content details. A similar cooperation is underway this year to curb misinformation, false content, and hate speech.

Going in line with the adopted policy by the electoral body of the Himalayan Nation, the political parties also increased their social media budget for the 5 March election. To have a strong presence on social media and exert influence on voters, the political parties and candidates are hiring professionals- social media influencers and managers.

"Right after the filing of the candidacy for First-Past-the-Post, demand for social media managers and creative artists who can make electoral campaigns boom. Currently in the market, professional fees for handling social media handles of the candidates start from half-a-million rupees," a digital platform handler said.

The change that has been seen over time started back from the 2022 local elections, which have reshaped the nation's digital terrain. With the dominance of technology, the electorate is no longer defined solely by geography-districts, constituencies, or wards but by digital affinities and platform behaviours.

As per the experts, the Cost Per Click (CPC) on average on Facebook in Nepal ranges from NPR 5 to NPR 40 ($0.04 - $0.30 USD). In comparison, Google Ads averages around $0.64 USD. Similarly, the Cost Per Mille (CPM), the cost to reach 1,000 people on Facebook, fluctuates between NPR 80 and NPR 500 ($0.60 - $3.75 USD).

Dr Rishikesh Dahal, Assistant Professor at the Central Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the Tribhuvan University, the oldest varsity of Nepal, points out two reasons behind the change in the dynamics of the political campaigning.

"It is turning into digital election campaigning by all political parties and candidates. One of the reasons is that the Election Commission, Nepal, prioritises digital campaigning rather than pamphlets and other traditional means. Another aspect is the big impact of digital and social media products, and the consumption pattern is very high," Dahal said.

According to Meta's Ad Library, since September 2022, a total of 33, 413 ads have been posted on Facebook for which a total of 285, 608 USD has been spent. In the last month, from 25 January to 23 February, 2026, election-related expenses have increased in Nepal, with a single account running 108 advertisement spending 3, 424 USD.

The Gen Z protest of September last year which ousted KP Sharma Oli's government started with a call on social media, also used the platform Discord to elect Sushila Karki as the interim leader.

Now, Oli's party, the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) contesting from Jhapa-5, had formed "Cyber Army", which was later renamed as "Cyber Circle". The stakes are high for Oli after rapper turned Mayor Balendra Shah is standing against him in the fray.

Similarly, Nepali Congress, the largest party in the September-dissolved parliament, also had formed the "Nepali Congress Wide Information Network" (NC WIN) on 6 September 2021 to promote the party via social media. A separate team has been formed to launch the digital campaign for the party leaders. —*ANI*

Heavy clashes at Afghanistan, Pakistan border

KABUL, 26 FEB

Afghan military claims to have begun strikes against Pakistan in retaliation for earlier airstrikes. Afghanistan military corps' media office said "heavy clashes" had begun on Thursday night "in response to the recent airstrikes carried out by Pakistani forces in Nangarhar and Paktia" provinces. There is no confirmation from Pakistan and no immediate information on casualties. On Sunday, Pakistan's military carried out strikes along the border with Afghanistan, saying they killed 70 militants. Afghanistan rejected the claim, saying dozens of civilians had been killed, including women and children. —*PTI*

IMF sees buoyant US economy, but warns of tariffs

WASHINGTON, 26 FEB

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecasts a buoyant US economy with faster growth and lower unemployment in 2026 but warns of risks from increasing debt and tariffs. The IMF expects US gross domestic product (GDP) to grow 2.4 per cent in late 2026, up from 2.2 per cent last year. Unemployment is forecast to fall from 4.5 per cent to 4.1 per cent, with inflation reaching the Federal Reserve's 2 per cent target by 2027. IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva said the Fed could cut interest rates to around 3.4 per cent but should avoid deeper cuts unless the job market worsens. Strong productivity has helped, but Georgieva noted protectionist policies may have hampered growth, and rising debt — from just under 100 per cent to nearly 110 per cent of GDP by 2031 — poses a stability risk. —*PTI*

After 5 die in S Africa mine, firm seeks liquidation

JOHANNESBURG, 26 FEB

Five miners trapped after a mudslide at Ekapa Mine are presumed dead, with the owners announcing the mine's liquidation. The 17 February incident involved a surge of water, mud, and rocks flooding an underground section at 800 metres deep, trapping miners. Rescue efforts confirmed conditions were unsurvivable as tunnels filled with muddy water. The owners, Ekapa Resources and Ekapa Minerals, announced the mine's immediate closure. The decision risks 1,200 jobs, with the National Union of Mineworkers planning legal action. The Department of Mineral Resources will meet with the company to discuss next steps as South Africa's status as a leading diamond and gold producer. —*PTI*

IX

Google search packed with 'Punch the Monkey'

NEW YORK, 26 FEB

A playful Easter egg by Google has delighted users worldwide after the viral search term "Punch The Monkey" triggered floating hearts across the screen. The animation celebrates Punch, a seven-month-old Japanese macaque who has become an online sensation. Punch, Born in July 2025 at Ichikawa City Zoo, Punch originally named Panchi-kun was abandoned by his mother shortly after birth. Zookeepers intervened and provided comfort using an orangutan soft toy from IKEA, which he now clings to constantly. The touching sight has drawn visitors and millions of social media reactions. and boosting zoo visits. The trend even reached India, where Mumbai Police used it to promote the 112 emergency helpline with the hashtag #JustPunchIn112. —*AGENCIES*

'Practical steps' made during Iran-US talks

Amid US buildup, Iran seeks to retain nuclear enrichment rights

GENEVA, 26 FEB

—FREEPIK

Iran and US held another round of indirect talks in Geneva on Thursday to try to reach a deal on Tehran's nuclear program and potentially avert another war as the US gathers a massive fleet of aircraft and warships in the Middle East. Oman's Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi, who is acting as the mediator, said negotiators had exchanged "creative and positive ideas" and would return after taking a break at the time of publishing. "We hope to make more progress," he added.

Tehran said that "important" and "practical" proposals were advanced during negotiations.

US President Donald Trump wants a deal to constrain Iran's nuclear program, and he sees an opportunity while the country is struggling at home with growing dissent following nationwide protests.

While Trump said he prefers to solve the crisis through diplomacy, he has also said he is considering a limited strike on Iran to pressure its leaders to accept a deal.

"There would be no victory for anybody — it would be a devastating war," Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told India Today in an interview filmed on Wednesday just before he flew to Geneva. "Since the Americans' bases are scattered through different places in the region, then unfortunately perhaps the whole region would be engaged and be involved, so it is a terrible scenario."

Araghchi is representing Iran at the talks. Steve Witkoff, a billionaire real estate developer and friend of Trump who serves as a special Mideast envoy, is heading up the US delegation with Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and US envoy Steve Witkoff —*PTI/WIKIPEDIA*

RUBIO AND VANCE WARN IRAN

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Vice President JD Vance spoke with reporters on Wednesday on how Tehran is working to rebuild sites that were damaged by American and Israeli airstrikes during last year's 12-day war, a claim that some analysts have cast doubt on.

Rubio added that its ballistic missiles were a major threat to US assets. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly urged Trump to include the ballistic missiles in the talks. Iran's arsenal is among the largest in the region.

Rubio said that Tehran is not enriching uranium now, "but they're trying to get to the point where they can."

Iran maintains it has the right to enrich uranium and does not want to discuss other issues, like its long-range missile program or support for armed groups like Hamas and Hezbollah.

IF THE TALKS FAIL

If the talks fail, uncertainty hangs over the timing of any possible US attack. It is not clear if any limited strikes on Iran would work.

If America attacks, Iran has said US military bases in the region would be considered legitimate targets, putting at risk tens of thousands of American service members. Iran has also threatened to attack Israel, meaning a regional war again could erupt across the Middle East.

Notably, Iran also has control over the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial shipping corridor, in addition to housing some of the world's largest oil reserves. —*Agencies*

Cuban military opened fire on a US speedboat, killing four people and injuring six others on Wednesday, in Cuban waters —*X @EMBACUBAUS*

Cuba kills 4 'infiltrators' on US speedboat

HAVANA, 26 FEB

Cuban soldiers opened fire on a US-registered speedboat that entered Cuba's waters, killing four people and wounding six others on Wednesday.

The Cuban interior ministry said that all 10 passengers were armed Cubans with a "known history of criminal and violent activity" living in the US and were attempting to infiltrate the island and unleash terrorism. Cuba said the 10 passengers opened fire on soldiers first.

The incident comes amid heightened tensions between Washington and Havana after the US raids in Venezuela. The US government has imposed an energy blockade on Cuba.

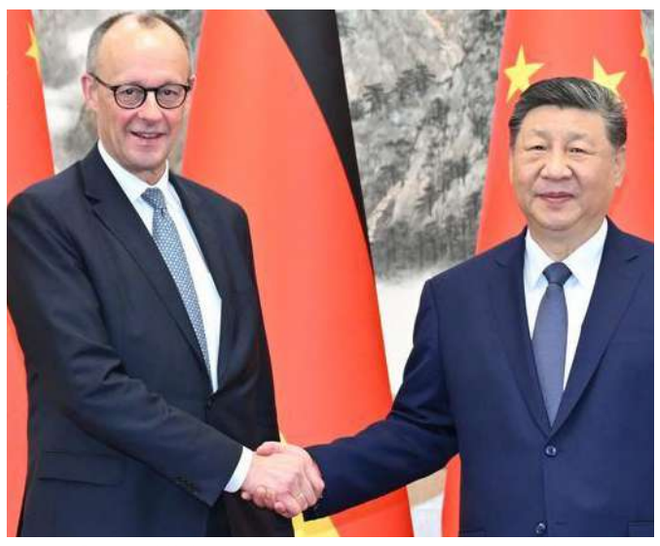
The Cuban government said that some of the accused were sent by the US and were seeking a regime change.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said that the US was investigating the "highly unusual" speed boat shooting and said that Washington would not rely solely on Cuba's information.

"It's not something that happens every day. It's something that hasn't happened with Cuba in a very long time," Rubio said.

Vice President JD Vance said that the White House was monitoring the situation. "Hopefully it's not as bad as we fear," Vance said.

This comes as US President Donald Trump signed an executive order that would impose a tariff on any country that sells or provides oil to Cuba, and blocked Venezuela from shipping oil to Havana, accentuating the energy crisis. Cuba has been forced to depend on Mexico after Trump blocked shipments from Venezuela. —*PTI*



Chinese President Xi Jinping and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz shake hands at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing —*XINHUA*

China, Germany seek to develop win-win relations

BEIJING, 26 FEB

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged to deepen ties the between two of the biggest economies. The two pledged to develop a "win-win" relationship as China overtook the US as Germany's largest trading partner.

Merz' visit comes as global order has been upended by US President Donald Trump's sweeping tariff policies.

Bilateral trade between China and Germany rose 2.2 per cent to 251 billion euros last year while trade with Germany's trade with US fell 5 per cent to 240 billion euros amid US tariff tensions.

"The international landscape is undergoing the most profound transformations since the end of World War II," Xi said according to Xinhua news. Germany and China should therefore increase their bilateral partnership, he added.

Merz replied that the countries should "emphasise the things we have in common and face the challenges we stand before together".

Merz and Xi also spoke about the Russia-Ukraine war. China has been a staunch support of Russia during the five-year war, and although Merz said that no decision about the war could be made without China, nothing significant appeared to come out of the meeting.

Merz arrived in Beijing for a two-day visit on Tuesday with a delegation of 30 top executives from firms including Volkswagen, Mercedes-Benz, Siemens, BMW, Bayer and Adidas. He urged Chinese firms to step up investment in Germany. He said that China had committed to purchase up to 120 Airbus aircrafts from Germany. —*Agencies*

I DO NOT RECALL ENCOUNTERING EPSTEIN: HILLARY

WASHINGTON, 26 FEB

Former US secretary Hillary Clinton told House lawmakers she had no knowledge of the crimes committed by late sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein and his partner Ghislaine Maxwell.

"I had no knowledge of their crimes and don't recall ever encountering Epstein," Hillary said in the opening statement of a two days of congressional depositions that will include her husband and former US president Bill Clinton.

They knew Maxwell through the Clinton Foundation. Maxwell even attended a family wedding in 2010. Maxwell currently incarcerated for sex trafficking.

It marks the first time a former president has been compelled to testify before Congress. The Clintons agreed to closed-door depositions after months of disputes and threats of contempt charges.

The US Justice Department said on Wednesday that it is reviewing any withheld Epstein documents and will release materials wrongly withheld. The announcement follows media reports flagging missing documents in Maxwell's case files.

These include FBI interviews with an unidentified woman who claims President Donald Trump and Epstein sexually assaulted her as a minor in the 1980s. —*Agencies*

Russia bombs Ukraine ahead of Geneva peace talks

KYIV, 26 FEB

Russia fired 420 drones and 39 missiles at eight regions in Ukraine, hitting both critical infrastructure and residential areas—*UKRAINE EMERGENCY SERVICE*

Russia launched a barrage of 420 drones and 39 missiles at Ukraine overnight, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Thursday, as US and Ukrainian envoys were due to meet in Geneva for peace talks.

The nighttime bombardment, which included 11 ballistic missiles, targeted critical infrastructure and residential areas across eight regions of Ukraine, Zelenskyy said. Dozens of people, including children, were injured, officials said, though authorities did not immediately publish a confirmed total.

Zelenskyy said late on Wednesday that he had spoken by phone with US President Donald Trump and negotiators Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner ahead of the meeting. Zelenskyy said he thanked Trump for his "efforts and engagement" in pursuing peace negotiations.

Thursday's talks between the American and Ukrainian envoys aimed to address details of a possible postwar recovery plan for Ukraine and discuss preparations for an upcoming trilateral meeting with Moscow officials, perhaps next week, Zelenskyy said, as the war entered its fifth year.

"We expect this meeting to create an opportunity to move talks to the leaders' level. President Trump supports this step," Zelenskyy wrote on X. —*AGENCIES*

B'desh to re-arrest Awami League activists

DHAKA, 26 FEB

Bangladesh's northwestern Rajshahi range police chief ordered the re-arrest of leaders and activists of the banned Awami League, said reports. The order, aimed at those released on bail after court rulings, instructs police to re-arrest individuals by implicating them in other cases.

Deputy Inspector General Mohammad Shahjahan stated that activists who are capable of strengthening, re-organisation activity at the field level should be re-arrested if they possess "such characteristics". The Wednesday order, covers eight northwestern districts and emphasises.

- The former interim government, officially disbanded Sheikh Hasina's Awami League last year through an executive order.

The interim government, led by Muhammad Yunus, disbanded Sheikh Hasina's Awami League last year through an executive order. Since then, Hasina has lived in India, while many of her party's leaders and workers have been jailed or are on the run.

Recently, some have been released on bail following the election of BNP Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's.

Shahjahan clarified that the order did not specify any political organisation by name. "We didn't mention any specific political parties or organisations," he said. —*PTI*

TRAINS NUKES AT SOUTH

N Korea could get along with US: Kim

SEOUL, 26 FEB

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un —*KCNA*

North Korea could get along with the US if Washington accepts Seoul's nuclear arsenal, said leader Kim Jong Un.

As he concluded a ruling party congress outlining his policy goals for the next five years, he said that North Korea could "completely destroy" South Korea if its security were threatened, reiterating his refusal to engage with Seoul, state media reported on Tuesday.

Kim called for developing new weapons systems to bolster his nuclear-armed military, including intercontinental ballistic missiles that could be launched from underwater and an expanded arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons, such as artillery and short-range missiles, targeting South Korea, the official Korean Central News Agency said.

He said the accelerated development of his nuclear and missile program in recent years "permanently cemented" the country's status as a nuclear weapons state.

"It is our party's firm will to further expand and strengthen our national nuclear power, and thoroughly exercise our status as a nuclear state," Kim said. "We will focus on projects to increase the number of nuclear weapons and expand nuclear operational means."

If Washington "respects our present [nuclear] position as stipulated in the Constitution... and withdraws its hostile policy.. there is no reason why we cannot get along well with the US," Kim added.

North Korea has assembled around 50 warheads, possesses enough fissile material to produce up to 40 more and is accelerating the production of further fissile material, think tank Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimated last year.

Notably, North Korea has been strategically aligning with Russia, and has sent thousands of its soldiers to fight in Moscow's war on Ukraine.

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly toyed with the idea of meeting the Nort Korean Leader. Trump is scheduled to visit China on 31 March, and may meet Kim on the trip. —*AGENCIES*

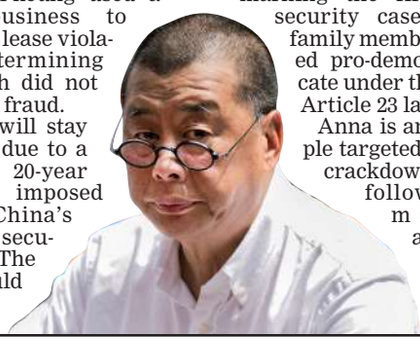
Hong Kong court quashes Jimmy Lai's fraud verdict

HONG KONG, 26 FEB

A Hong Kong appellate court on Thursday quashed fraud convictions against former media magnate **Jimmy Lai.** He is an outspoken critic of China's ruling Communist Party and founded the now-defunct Apple Daily.

The Court of Appeal overturned a lower court ruling that Lai and co-defendant Wong Wai-keung used a media business to "shield" a lease violation, determining the breach did not constitute fraud.

Lai, 78, will stay in prison due to a previous 20-year sentence imposed under China's national security law. The ruling could reduce Lai's total sentence if judges allow two years to run concurrently.



FIRST NATIONAL SECURITY CASE ON A FAMILY MEMBER

A Hong Kong court sentenced 69-year-old Kwok Yin-sang to eight months in prison for attempting to withdraw funds from his US-based activist daughter's insurance policy, marking the first national security case against a family member of a wanted pro-democracy advocate under the city's 2024 Article 23 law.

Anna is among 34 people targeted as part of a crackdown on dissent following the massive, anti-government protests in 2019.—*PTI*

Sedemac to launch Rs 1,087 crore IPO on 4 March

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

Sedemac Mechatronics, a powertrain controls and auto parts manufacturer, will float its Rs 1,087 crore initial share-sale for public subscription on 4 March. The price band has been fixed at Rs 1,287-1,352 per share, valuing the company at close to Rs 6,000 crore. The company's maiden public offering will conclude on 6 March and the bidding for anchor investors will take place on 2 March. The IPO is entirely an offer for sale (OFS) of up to 80,43,300 equity shares by promoters Manish Sharma and Ashwini Amit Dixit and investors selling shareholders. Several other investors will offload their stakes in the company. Sedemac Mechatronics will not receive any proceeds from the IPO.—*PTI*

— ANI

Silver declines to Rs 2.70L/kg; gold falls to Rs1.62L/10g

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

Silver prices declined by Rs 7,400 to Rs 2.70 lakh per kg, while gold dropped by Rs 1,300 to Rs 1.62 lakh per 10 grams in the national capital on Thursday due to weak global trends and profit-booking by traders. Silver fell by nearly 3 per cent, to Rs 2,70,500 per kg from the previous closing level of Rs 2,77,900 per kg. Gold of 99.9 per cent purity depreciated nearly 1 per cent, to Rs 1,62,900 per 10 grams. A firm US dollar further dampened the investor appetite for bullion. In the international market, spot silver decreased 2.15 per cent to USD 87.28 per ounce, while gold traded at USD 5,176.21 per ounce.—*PTI*

— FREEPIK

Rupee dips 1P to settle at 90.92 against USD

MUMBAI, 26 FEB

The rupee slipped 1 paisa to settle at 90.92 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday, weighed down by a rise in global crude oil prices and a firm greenback against major rivals. However, foreign fund inflows supported the local unit and prevented the decline. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 90.86 against the greenback and traded in a narrow range of 90.81-90.93 during the session. Eventually, it closed at 90.92 (provisional), down 1 paisa from its previous close. The rupee stayed range-bound and settled with a gain of 4 paise at 90.91 against the US dollar on Wednesday. The dollar index on Thursday was trading 0.03 per cent lower at 97.73.—*PTI*

ePlane opens air taxi testing facility at IIT Madras

MUMBAI, 26 FEB

Chennai-based deep-tech startup The ePlane Company has opened a 60,000 sq ft testing and prototyping facility for its electric air taxi at the IIT Madras Discovery Campus in Thaiyur. The site, India's first integrated plant for serial electric aircraft production, brings together design, prototyping, integration, and subsystem testing less than one roof. It houses composite fabrication, electric powertrain assembly, avionics testing, and a ground test vehicle facility to support full-scale development. The start-up is developing India's first electric air taxi, the e200X, and the new facility will accelerate prototype production and key milestones, including tethered hover testing, en route to type certification. —*PTI*

Sebi revamps MFs rules; launches Life Cycle Funds

It ensures 'true-to-label' positioning, curbs high return claims

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

Markets regulator Sebi on Thursday came out with a revamped framework for classification of mutual fund schemes introducing Life Cycle Funds, scrapping the Solution Oriented Schemes category.

The move, aimed at ensuring 'true-to-label' positioning and curbing exaggerated return claims in scheme names, comes as Sebi seeks to align the regulatory architecture with the evolving mutual fund landscape and emerging opportunities across asset classes.

Sebi has broadly classified schemes into five categories -- equity, debt, hybrid, life cycle and other schemes -- Fund of Fund (FoF) Schemes and Passive Schemes such as Index Funds or ETFs (exchange traded funds).

The 'type of scheme' description in offer documents and advertisements must strictly follow Sebi's prescribed format.

Existing schemes under the Solution Oriented Scheme category would stop accepting fresh subscriptions and merge with other schemes —*PTI*

Nikunj Saraf, CEO at Choice Wealth said that Sebi's new classification rules are a meaningful step towards simplifying an industry that had become increasingly complex for retail investors.

Solution Oriented Schemes category has been discontinued. Existing schemes under this category would stop accepting fresh subscriptions and merge with other schemes having similar asset allocation and risk profiles, subject to Sebi's prior approval.

Further, foreign securities will no longer be treated as a separate asset class.

It introduced Life Cycle Funds as open-ended schemes with a pre-determined maturity and a glide path strategy for goal-based investing across equity, debt, InvITs, ETCDs and Gold/Silver ETFs. Further, the allocation to equity reduces progressively as the scheme approaches maturity, while debt allocation increases.

For Index Funds and ETFs, at least 95 per cent of total assets are required to be invested in securities of the index being replicated or tracked. These will be open-ended schemes tracking a specific index.

FoFs must invest a minimum of 95 per cent of their assets in the underlying funds.

Debt exposure for maturities below five years must be limited to AA. —*PTI*

The NSE has asked 20 investment banks and 10 law firms to submit their proposals in its IPO offering —*x*

NSE invites banks to pitch for Rs 23,000 cr IPO

MUMBAI, 26 FEB

National Stock Exchange of India (NSE) has invited investment banks to pitch for roles in its long-awaited Rs 23,000-crore initial public offering, according to a Bloomberg report citing people familiar with the matter.

Around 20 investment banks and 10 law firms have been asked to submit proposals. Advisers are expected to be finalised by mid-March 2026, with the Draft Red Herring Prospectus (DRHP) likely to be filed in March–April. The exchange could potentially list in late 2026, subject to regulatory approvals. The move signals renewed momentum for what could become one of India's largest IPOs, after years of delays stemming from regulatory and legal hurdles. Earlier this month, NSE constituted a committee to advance the listing process.

The proposed issue is expected to be entirely an offer for sale, with existing shareholders likely to divest around 4 to 4.5 per cent of equity.

Based on prevailing unlisted market prices, the share sale could raise about $2.5 billion (roughly Rs 22,700 crore).

NSE operates the world's busiest derivatives market by number of contracts traded.

Its listing has been closely watched by investors and regulators following setbacks, including the co-location case and governance concerns. —*Agencies*

NSE hires Rothschild to manage IPO

NSE on 12 February appointed Rothschild & Co as an independent adviser to oversee its long-awaited initial public offering, a move that has stirred debate in financial circles. NSE said Rothschild would assist in selecting lead bankers, legal counsel and other intermediaries. Headquartered in Paris and London, Rothschild & Co is a multinational financial advisory group with more than 200 years of history. It specialises in mergers and acquisitions, corporate finance, advising corporations and governments. It is now led by Alexandre de Rothschild, the seventh generation to head the business. The appointment has sparked debate.

Critics argue the NSE is critical national infrastructure and the role of a global, non-domestic adviser in shaping its IPO blueprint is questioning. Some also allege Rothschild wields "subtle power" beyond a standard mandate, potentially influencing valuation and ownership structures. The Rothschild family is the Ashkenazi Jewish banking dynasty originating in the 16th-century Frankfurt, Germany. It was founded by Mayer Amschel Rothchild, who placed his five sons in key European cities—London, Paris, Vienna, Naples, and Frankfurt — building one of the largest private fortunes in history and a vast financial empire. —*SALAR NEWS*

Stock markets end flat in volatile trade

MUMBAI, 26 FEB

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty ended almost flat after a volatile day of trading on Thursday, dragged down by HDFC Bank and other blue-chip stocks.

Also, caution ahead of the US–Iran talks made investors stay on the sidelines.

The 30-share BSE Sensex dipped marginally by 27.46 points or 0.03 per cent to settle at 82,248.61. During the day, it hit a high of 82,579.16 and a low of 81,970.47, gyrating 608.69 points.

The 50-share NSE Nifty eked out a marginal gain of 14.05 points or 0.06 per cent to end at 25,496.55.

From the Sensex pack, Trent, Eternal, Power Grid, HDFC Bank, Asian Paints, UltraTech Cement, NTPC and Axis Bank were among the biggest laggards.

Bharat Electronics, Sun Pharma, Adani Ports, Maruti and Bharti Airtel were among the gainers.

"The domestic market surrendered its early gains amid mixed global cues and increased caution ahead of the US–Iran nuclear talks, as well as key data releases including US initial jobless claims and India's GDP print, which triggered profit-booking," Vinod Nair, head of research, Geojit Investments Limited, said.

Sensex dipped by 24.46 points, while Nifty gained 14.05 points —*PTI*

On Wednesday, the Sensex ended 0.06 per cent higher at 82,276.07. The Nifty went up by 0.23 per cent to settle at 25,482.50. —*PTI*

Yes Bank reports illegal forex card transactions of Rs 2.5 cr

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

Yes Bank on Thursday said it has detected unauthorised transactions worth USD 2,80,000 (Rs 2.5 crore) related to its multi-currency prepaid forex cards.

Unauthorised transactions were carried out by Yes Bank's Multi-Currency Prepaid Forex Card, which were issued in partnership with the BookMyForex.

These unauthorised transactions were attempted on specific BIN numbers only and these fraudulent transactions were carried out on 15 merchants that are based out of a Latin American country, in the early hours of 24 February , 2026, Yes Bank said in a regulatory filing.

"The internal investigation by the bank has revealed that during the incident period transactions approximately equivalent of USD 0.28 million (about Rs 2.5 crore) have been approved on behalf of 5,000 customers," it said.

Due to the bank's monitoring and control mechanisms, 688 unauthorized transaction attempts were declined, which led to safeguarding of approximately USD 100,000.

The bank is working with card network to raise chargeback to ensure that the impacted customers do not face any financial loss.

As a security measure, it said, the bank has subsequently restricted e-commerce transactions from the specific Latin American country.

It came to light following unusual increase in transaction decline by the bank's fraud monitoring system during 24 February. This is the first major issue being faced by Yes Bank following Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation (SMBC) of Japan acquisition of a 24.9 per cent stake in it for about Rs 16,000 crore.

SMBC became the largest shareholder of Yes Bank. It appointed Shinichiro Nishino and Rajeev Veeravalli Kannan as non-executive and non-independent directors with effect from 18 September—*PTI*

Swiggy, IRCTC expand 'Food on Train' service to 152 stns

MUMBAI, 26 FEB

Food delivery and quick commerce firm Swiggy has expanded its 'Food on Train' service in collaboration with IRCTC to 152 stations nationwide, up from 70 a year ago, reflecting growing demand for diverse culinary options among travellers.

The company has doubled down on its network, achieving 117 per cent growth from February 2025 to February 2026. It plans to focus on diversity by targeting both major junctions and regional stops, including Itarsi (Madhya Pradesh), Tirunelveli (Tamil Nadu) and Kharagpur (West Bengal).

In line with the Holi travel rush, Swiggy has launched a special Holi food menu for passengers, available from 28 February to 8 March. —*PTI*

Anil Ambani appears before ED in fraud case

Industrialist Anil Ambani arrives at the ED headquarters for questioning in connection with an alleged fraud case in New Delhi on Thursday —*PTI*

NEW DELHI, 25 FEB

Reliance Group chairman Anil Ambani appeared before the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in central Delhi on Thursday for a second round of questioning in connection with an alleged bank fraud and money laundering case. The 66-year-old entered the agency's office around 10.30am, where officials recorded his statement under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).

Ambani was previously questioned in 2025. The probe concerns an alleged bank fraud exceeding Rs 40,000 crore by Reliance Communication. Former company president Punit Garg was arrested in January, with the ED claiming the funds were diverted through multiple foreign subsidiaries and offshore entities. Ambani and his group companies face loan fraud allegations. —*PTI*

Mkts got AI fears wrong post Q4 earnings: Nvidia

SANTA CLARE, 26 FEB

Nvidia chief executive Jensen Huang said on Wednesday that markets had misjudged the threat artificial intelligence poses to software companies, hours after the chipmaker reported blockbuster earnings that beat expectations.

Quarterly revenue surged 73 per cent to $68.1bn from $39.3 billion a year earlier, while profit nearly doubled to about $43 billion, or $1.76 a share, from $22.1 billion, or 89 cents a share. The results defied concerns over an "AI bubble", a theory that soaring valuations driven by heavy AI investment may outstrip sustainable earnings, echoing the dot-com era.

In an interview with CNBC, Huang said software groups such as ServiceNow would deploy AI agents to enhance, not replace, their services. "I think the markets got it wrong," he said, adding that AI tools would be fine-tuned to improve productivity.

Huang declared: "AI is here… AI is only going to get better." He cited rapid adoption of tools such as Claude by Anthropic and Codex by OpenAI as proof of growing returns.

Despite this optimism, global markets have slid amid disruption fears.

On 24 February, India's IBM shares tumbled 13.2 per cent, the worst in 25 years as after Anthropic's Claude Code tool raised fears of disruption to mainframe software business. —*Agencies*

HUAWEI GETS EARLY START

DeepSeek withholds new AI model from Nvidia

SAN FRANCISCO/ SINGAPORE, 25 FEB

Chinese artificial intelligence firm DeepSeek has withheld pre-release access to its forthcoming V4 model from leading US chipmakers. This fuelled speculation that Beijing is seeking to sideline American hardware providers.

According to Reuters, DeepSeek did not share early versions of the model with Nvidia or Advanced Micro Devices (AMD), despite previously collaborating with them to optimise performance on widely used processors. Instead, early access was granted to domestic suppliers, including Huawei Technologies, giving Chinese chipmakers a head start of several weeks.

DeepSeek did not share early versions of the model with Nvidia or AMD despite collaborating with them to optimise performance —*DEEPSEEK*

- US officials alleged that DeepSeek trained V4 using Nvidia's advanced Blackwell chips at a facility in Inner Mongolia, and may attempt to obscure evidence of American chip usage.

AI developers typically provide hardware partners with advance access to major updates to ensure software runs efficiently on their systems. US officials have alleged that DeepSeek trained V4 using Nvidia's advanced Blackwell chips at a facility in Inner Mongolia, and may attempt to obscure evidence of American chip usage while publicly claiming the model runs on Huawei processors.

The model is expected to be released within weeks.

Analysts view the move as part of a broader Chinese strategy to disadvantage US hardware and AI models domestically while strengthening national champions.

Since emerging in January 2025, DeepSeek's models have been downloaded more than 75 million times, with Chinese open-source offerings gaining ground globally.

DeepSeek's debut triggered a historic market rout, wiping between $465 billion and $600 billion from Nvidia's market value in a single day after claims it built world-class models for under $6 million.

Amid debate over export controls, US President Donald Trump recently said Nvidia could sell chips to approved Chinese buyers, subject to a 25 per cent US government fee—*Salar News*

Clinical SA hammer West Indies by nine wickets

South Africa tighten grip on semifinal spot

AHMEDABAD, 26 FEB

Clinical South Africa outclassed West Indies by nine wickets in their Super 8s clash to stretch their unbeaten run and all but seal a place in the semifinals of the T20 World Cup here on Thursday.

A dominating show by the Proteas pacer was followed by authoritative batting. Yet again, South Africa executed their plans perfectly to further their cause, racking up their sixth win on the trot and halting West Indies' unbeaten run in the tournament. With South Africa taking two vital points off the West Indies, hosts India now have their qualification hopes firmly in their own hands, as a Proteas defeat would have dented their chances severely.

The loss hurt the Caribbean side's net run rate, which came down to 1.791 from a healthy 5.350.

First, it was South Africa's pacers that rocked the West Indies' batting line-up before a lower-order fightback from Romario Shepherd (52 not out) and Jason Holder (49) lifted the two-time champions to 176 for eight. Then skipper Aiden Markram (82 not out), Quinton De Kock (47) and Ryan Rickelton (45 not out) batted with authority as the Proteas overhauled the target in 16.1 overs. By collecting 69 runs from the six Powerplay overs, the South Africans had demoralised the Windies attack. Except for a few hit-and-miss shots, the two openers controlled the proceedings.

They struck both pacers and spinners with equal ease and raised a quick 95-run stand in 7.5 overs, hitting 16 boundaries, including six shots over the rope.

De Kock hit four sixes and as many fours in his 24-ball knock before offering a catch to Jason Holder at long-on.

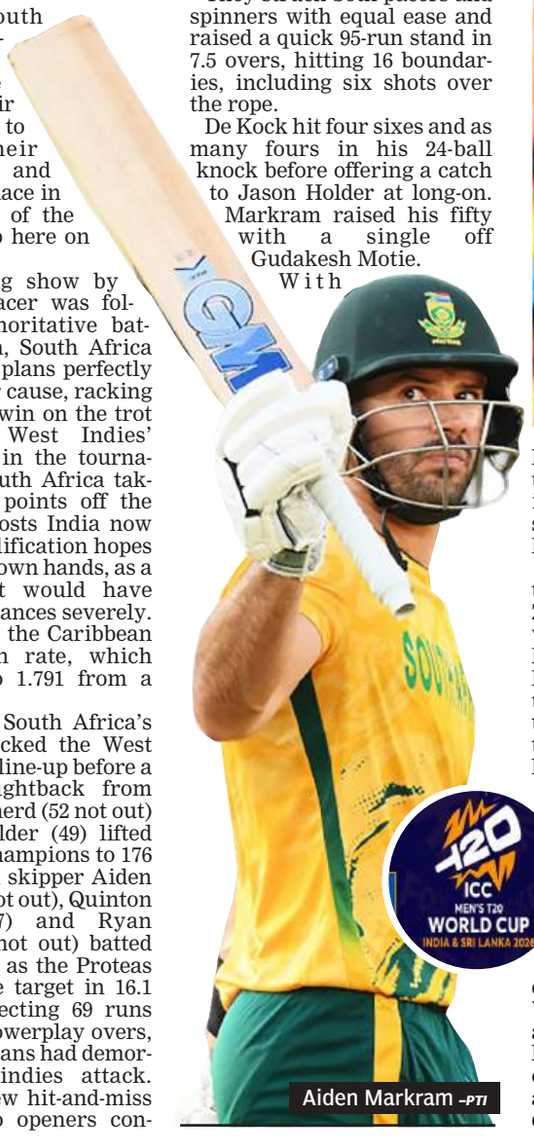
Markram raised his fifty with a single off Gudakesh Motie.

With Rickelton, Markram raised an unbeaten 82-run stand and finished the game in style with a straight four off pacer Jason Holder.

Earlier, from the high of their dominant win over Zimbabwe, the West Indies were in for a rude shock as Kagiso Rabada (2/22) and Lungi Ngidi (3/30) got the ball to bounce from good length to trouble the batters, reducing the big-hitting West Indies line-up to 83 for seven.

Holder (49 off 31) and Romario Shepherd (52 not out off 37) then stitched together a record 89-run stand for the eighth wicket to prevent a complete collapse of the innings.

Romario Shepherd and Jason Holder during the ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2026 -PTI



Aiden Markram -PTI

We could not assess conditions quickly: Shai Hope

West Indies captain Shai Hope admitted that failure to quickly assess conditions and execute plans cost his side dearly as they slumped to their first defeat of the T20 World Cup against South Africa in the Super 8 stage here on Thursday.Hope said the result was not what the team wanted, but insisted it was more about execution than any drastic change in conditions as they played their first game in Ahmedabad."There are so many factors you can discuss, but I think it always comes down to execution. Sometimes when you don't adapt and assess as quickly as you would like, you find yourself in a big catch-up," Hope said at the post-match press conference. Describing the pitch as a "very good surface" that reminded him of South African conditions, Hope felt his batters perhaps did not size up the bounce and movement early enough.

Brief Score

South Africa 177 for 1 (Markram 82*, de Kock 47, Rickelton 45*) beat West Indies 176 for 8 (Shepherd 52, Holder 49, Ngidi 3-20, Rabada 2-22, Bosch 2-31) by nine wickets. —*PTI*

WITH ONE FOOT IN SEMIS

New Zealand spinners set to test Brook's England

COLOMBO, 26 FEB

New Zealand spinners, led by their mercurial skipper Mitchell Santner, will pose some difficult questions to an English line-up spearheaded by the marauding Harry Brook when the two sides clash in a Super Eight game of the T20 World Cup here on Friday.

The match is more significant for the Black Caps as they bid to secure a semi-final spot, while England are already through to the last four after two consecutive wins.

The huge 61-run win over Sri Lanka has elevated New Zealand's net run-rate to +3.050, and to ensure that they progress, the Kiwis have to just avoid a heavy defeat.

Pakistan, after their defeat to England, has a net run-rate of -0.461 and would not only need New Zealand to lose badly but also have to beat Sri Lanka by a heavy margin to eclipse the Black Caps' NRR.

New Zealand has shown that they are comfortable playing against as many as six spinners in a match versus Sri Lanka. They actually beat the co-hosts in their own game.

While Brook and Will Jacks have both been comfortable against the likes of Saim Ayub, Mohammed Nawaz, and Shadab Khan, New Zealanders Santner, Rachin Ravindra, Glenn Phillips, and Cole McConchie could prove to be more handy on a slightly tackier Premadasa track compared to Pallekele. Brook is in good form, as demonstrated by his match-winning hundred against Pakistan, and the team would expect veteran Jos Buttler to up his game after having a quiet tournament so far. A good start by Buttler will put England in a strong position.

Santner and Brook -PTI

A captain like Santner makes you feel 10 feet: Ravindra

Mitchell Santner is a protective shield around his teammates and finds a way to make them feel bigger in stature, New Zealand opener Rachin Ravindra said in effusive praise of his captain after the Black Caps beat Sri Lanka by 61 runs to enter the T20 World Cup semifinals here.

While Ravindra scored 32 and also scalped 4 for 19 to win the Player Of The Match award, it was skipper Santner's 26-ball 47 that propelled New Zealand to 168 for 7 after being down and out at 84 for 6. He also bowled a miserly spell of 1/19 in four overs with half a dozen dot balls in Sri Lanka's 107 for 8.

According to Ravindra, the greatest attribute of Santner is showing the way with game-changing performances like the one against Sri Lanka on Wednesday.

"Obviously, we all know how chill he (Santner) is, but also how his mind works, like what ball is to bowl from what end is fantastic. But I think more than anything, he leads through his performances and his work ethic. —*PTI*

Women's ODI series: India eye improved batting show against Australia

HOBART, 26 FEB

Outplayed in the series-opener, reigning world champions India would aim for an improved batting effort in the second women's ODI against Australia to keep the three-match rubber alive here on Friday.

Having won the T20 series 2-1, a below-par India started the ODI contests on a disappointing note, losing by six wickets in Brisbane. The Indian women's team has never won a bilateral ODI series against Australia.

Australia have dominated the rivalry against India in this format, having won all 11 of the bilateral ODI series between the two sides, including a 3-0 win in late 2024 and a 2-1 victory in September 2025.

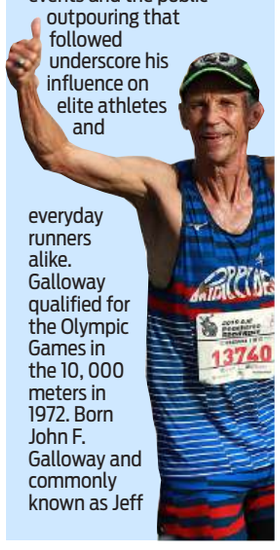
But India will look to draw inspiration from their five-wicket win over Australia in the 2025 Women's ODI World Cup semifinals.

In the lung-opener here, India were not upto the challenge and were bundled out for a paltry 214. Barring vice-captain Smriti Mandhana (58), skipper Harmanpreet Kaur (53) and Kahsvee Gautam (43), no other Indian batter could produce substantial knocks and struggled against Australia's disciplined bowling. The match starts at 9.20 am. —*PTI*

- PTI

Run-walk pioneer & Olympian Jeff no more

Jeff Galloway, a member of the 1972 U. S. Olympic team and the longtime advocate of the run-walk-run strategy, has died at age 80 after suffering a hemorrhagic stroke and undergoing emergency neurosurgery. The sequence of medical events and the public outpouring that followed underscore his influence on elite athletes and everyday runners alike. Galloway qualified for the Olympic Games in the 10, 000 meters in 1972. Born John F. Galloway and commonly known as Jeff



-PTI

Simone Biles becomes Laureus ambassador

NEW DELHI, 26 FEB

Seven-time Olympic gold-winning American gymnast Simone Biles has become a Laureus ambassador, joining a star-studded group that also features Indian javelin throw icon Neeraj Chopra and World Cup-winning former cricketer Yuvraj Singh. Biles, the most decorated gymnast in the sport's history and a four-time winner of the Laureus Sportswoman of the Year Award, kicked off her new role during a visit to Milan, where she visited Polisportiva Garegnano, a Laureus-supported gymnastics and multi-sport project. It provides opportunities to young people, particularly girls, to "grow in confidence, build resilience and develop life skills through sport". During her visit, she spent time on the mats with the young athletes, offering encouragement and sharing her experiences.—*PTI*

RONALDO BECOMES CO-OWNER OF SPANISH CLUB UD ALMERIA

DUBAI, 26 FEB

Cristiano Ronaldo has become a co-owner of Spanish second-division side UD Almeria, buyinga 25 per cent stake in the club.The club announced the ownership on Thursday, welcoming the Portugal legend on board."It has been a long-time ambition of mine to contribute to football, beyond the pitch," Ronaldo was quoted as saying in a media release. UD Almeria is a Spanish club with strong foundations and clear growth potential. —*PTI*

Prague Chess Festival: Gukesh draws with Niemann

BERLIN, 26 FEB

World champion D Gukesh survived some anxious moments in the early middle game before finally drawing with Hans Moke Niemann of the United States in the first round of the masters section of the Prague International Chess Festival.

The Berlin defence that went wrong for white could be a perfect heading for the encounter between the world champion and Niemann, who is making his way to the elite chess circles after being indirectly accused of foul play. It may be recalled that the American infamously won a game against world number one Magnus Carlsen, which will now be documented in a forthcoming Netflix series.

Niemann came all guns blazing and sacrificed a piece with the black piece as early as move 13 to put Gukesh on the back foot despite having the white pieces. —*PTI*

RANJI TROPHY FINAL

Nabi triple blow puts J&K on top before Mayank's unbeaten ton

HUBBALLI, 26 FEB

Jammu and Kashmir pacer Auqib Nabi produced an excellent opening spell to dismantle Karnataka's top-order as his side stayed within sniffing distance of a historic Ranji Trophy title, reducing the hosts to 220 for five here on Thursday.

J&K posted 584 in their first innings and were all out on the third day.

The 29-year-old tore through the Karnataka top-order with figures of 3 for 32 in 14 overs, bowling nine overs on the trot in a relentless first spell that rattled some of the well-known names of Indian cricket. Nabi drew first blood, removing KL Rahul.

He then struck twice in two balls to put Karnataka in bigger trouble. First, he removed India international Karun Nair with an unplayable delivery that angled in and darted away after pitching to knock the top of off stump, and then, dismissed the in-form Smaran Ravichandran in the very next delivery.

Veteran Mayank Agarwal (130 batting; 207 balls) consolidated in the final session with a resolute defensive technique to keep Jammu and Kashmir waiting. He also rode his luck, surviving a chance when he was dropped on 124.

Auqib Nabi produced an excellent opening spell -PTI

Mayank Agarwal -PTI

Despite his resistance, Karnataka were still trailing by 364 runs at stumps and needed another 165 runs to avoid a follow-on.

Having made their Ranji Trophy debut in 1959-60, Jammu and Kashmir reached their maiden semifinal and have continued their dream run in the final.

Nabi has been their standout performer throughout the campaign, and the day's haul took his season's tally to 58 wickets, just one shy of Uttarakhand spinner Mayank Mishra's 59 scalps.

Brief Scores

Jammu and Kashmir 584; 173.1 overs (Shubham Pundir 121, Yawer Hassan 88, Sahil Lotra 72, Paras Dogra 70, Kanhaiya Wadhawan 70; Prasidh Krishna 5/98). Karnataka 220/5; 69 overs (Mayank Agarwal 130 batting; Auqib Nabi 3/32). —*PTI*

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Madrid victory for 'everyone against racism': Aurelien

MADRID, 26 FEB

Real Madrid midfielder Aurelien Tchouameni said his team's 2-1 win against Benfica on Wednesday night, which secured a place in the Champions League last 16, was a victory for "everyone who is against racism".

The Frenchman was referring to the first leg of the play-off tie, which Madrid won 1-0 last week, which was marred by alleged racial abuse aimed at Vinicius Junior by Benfica's Gianluca Prestianni. Vinícius celebrated by dancing by the corner flag just like in the first leg then in front of Benfica fans which ignited a confrontation with Benfica players and the accusation that Gianluca Prestianni called him "monkey."

Real Madrid's Aurelien Tchouameni celebrates after scoring his side's opening goal -X/@ REALMADRID

"That's our Vinícius," said Madrid midfielder Aurélien Tchouaméni, who scored Madrid's first goal in the 16th, a couple of minutes after Benfica had taken the lead through Rafa Silva.

Prestianni, who has denied racially insulting Vinícius and has been defended by Benfica, was provisionally suspended for one match by UEFA and did not play on Wednesday even though the Argentine traveled to the Spanish capital. UEFA earlier Wednesday rejected Benfica's last-minute appeal against the provisional suspension.

Last week's match was halted for nearly 10 minutes after the referee installed the anti-racism protocol following Vinícius' complaint to him. —*PTI*

FIFA's Infantino confident Mexico can co-host WC

MEXICO CITY, 26 FEB

The violence that erupted in Mexico after the death of a powerful drug lord has left many questioning whether the country will be able to co-host the World Cup in just over three months. FIFA President Gianni Infantino thinks it can.

"Of course, we are monitoring the situation in Mexico these days, but I want to say from the outset that we have complete confidence in Mexico, in its president, Claudia Sheinbaum, and in the authorities, and we are convinced that everything will go as smoothly as possible," Infantino said late Tuesday in a press conference in Colombia.

"Mexico is a great country, like in every country in the world, things happen; we don't live on the moon or another planet," Infantino added. "That's why we have governments, police, and authorities who will ensure order and security." The Mexican army killed Nemesio Cervantes, "El Mencho," who led the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, on Sunday, sparking several days of violence. —*PTI*